yoshiharu

the man with-out talent

tsuge

"Tsuge's work represents a groundbreaking apotheosis of comics fiction at its most humane, literary, and poetic. I am thrilled that it is finally reaching the Western audience which has longed to read it for so many decades." –Chris Ware

translated and with an essay by Ryan Holmberg

US $22.95 / $29.95 CAN
ISBN 978-1-68137-443-7
52295
9 781681 374437
cover design by jason booher

Yoshiharu Tsuge is one of comics' most celebrated and influential artists, but his work has been almost entirely unavailable to English-speaking audiences. *The Man Without Talent*, his first book ever to be translated into English, is an unforgiving self-portrait of frustration. Swearing off cartooning as a profession, Tsuge's stand-in Sukezō Sukegawa takes on a series of unconventional jobs–vintage camera salesman, ferryman, and stone collector–hoping to find success among the hucksters, speculators, and deadbeats he does business with.

Instead, he fails again and again, unable to provide for his family, earning only their contempt and his own. The result is a dryly funny look at the pitfalls of the creative life, and an off-kilter portrait of modern Japan. Accompanied by an essay from translator Ryan Holmberg that discusses Tsuge's importance in comics and Japanese literature, *The Man Without Talent* is one of the world's great graphic novels.

Yoshiharu Tsuge is a cartoonist. Born in Tokyo in 1937, Tsuge began drawing comics in 1954, working primarily in the rental comics industry that was popular in impoverished post-war Japan. While working as an assistant to the cartoonist Shigeru Mizuki, Tsuge gained acclaim for his literary and surreal work in the comics magazine *Garo*. In the 70s, Tsuge turned to more introspective, autobiographical work in the "I-novel" genre, culminating in his masterpiece, *The Man Without Talent*. Tsuge has not published any new cartoons since the late 1980s. He lives in Tokyo.

Ryan Holmberg is an arts and comics historian. He has taught recently at the University of Tokyo and Duke University, is a frequent contributor to *Art in America*, *Artforum*, and *The Comics Journal*, and has edited and translated over two dozen manga by artists like Seiichi Hayashi, Osamu Tezuka, and Tadao Tsuge.

For *The Man Without Talent*, in keeping with the original Japanese orientation, begin at the other side of this book and read from right to left.

For the essay, turn to the next page and read from left to right.

NOTE:
To facilitate PDF scan reading, animation section is read front to back, but still right to left

WHERE IS YOSHIHARU TSUGE?

RYAN HOLMBERG

THIS IS A NEW YORK REVIEW COMIC
PUBLISHED BY THE NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS
435 Hudson Street, New York, NY 10014
www.nyrb.com

Muno no hito by Yoshiharu Tsuge
Copyright © Yoshiharu Tsuge 1998
Published in Japan by SHINCHOSHA Publishing Co., Ltd.
English translation rights arranged with SHINCHOSHA Publishing Co., Ltd.
through Ogihara Office Agency

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Library of Congress Control Number:2019943048

ISBN 978-1-68137-443-7

Printed in South Korea

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

WHERE IS YOSHIHARU TSUGE?

RYAN HOLMBERG

ON MOST DAYS, Yoshiharu Tsuge (born 1937) is at his home in Chōfu, a municipality fifteen kilometers west of central Tokyo. He has lived in the area almost continuously since 1966, when he took up a job as an assistant to the famous manga author Shigeru Mizuki after his own cartooning no longer sufficed to pay the bills.

But sometimes he is not at home. Of course, like most of us, Tsuge leaves his house, even if infrequently and only when necessary. Sometimes, however, he can't be found for days. He will simply disappear, which has aggravated editors for decades, and given devotees something to write about for just as long. Back in the late '60s and early '70s, he would take off for distant regions like Nagano, Kyushu, and Tohoku, hopping overnight trains, roaming from one remote and rundown hot spring to the next, calling on female fans, and entertaining thoughts of marrying and settling down with them or with local strippers without telling a soul back in Tokyo. Sometimes he would simply hide out in a Tokyo-area hotel (which is the pattern these days), so that he could be gone without really having to go anywhere. He might buy a new suit for an awards reception, then not only fail to show but also fail to return home.

For decades, Tsuge has called these disappearing acts "*jōhatsu*," literally "evaporation," which is also the title of the last chapter of this book.

For Tsuge, *jōhatsu* is not a way to "find oneself," but rather a way to escape one's existing self and life by inducing a new self into existence. Not a truer self, but one stronger, more courageous, and freer (or so he hoped) from the severe social anxieties that have afflicted him since childhood. Many of his most famous stories, especially those for the watershed alternative manga magazine *Garo* in the late '60s, thematize this fantasy specifically, usually with strange and unsettling results. Up and disappearing, however, vanished as an option after he got married and had a son in 1975, at which point he had to find ways to evaporate that didn't require leaving home. Oddly, despite a reputation for being intensely adverse to publicity and social interaction, Tsuge chose to foreground his private life more than ever—not as an exercise to try to get over his social anxieties, but so that he might dissolve into the proliferating fictional alter egos of his work and public persona as an artist.

Initially serialized in the quarterly magazine *Comic Baku* in 1985–1986, *The Man Without Talent* (*Munō no hito*) represents the culmination of a lifetime of attempts to disappear through autobiographical fiction. As a best seller with a movie adaptation (1991), it is arguably Tsuge's most popular and accessible work. Due to the large amount of personal information available about the artist in the years in which it is set and was created (the mid-'70s to mid-'80s), *The Man Without Talent* is also the Tsuge work for which it is easiest to trace correspondences between fact and fiction. Though Tsuge never sold stones or sported a mustache, Sukezō Sukegawa's creative woes, get-rich-quick schemes, and botched family trips closely follow the artist's life, as documented in Tsuge's writing and interviews during these years. "Selling Cameras" is practically fact, but for the pseudonyms. Sukezō's neuroses and self-doubt reflect Tsuge's real-life anxieties and mental illness, which turned crippling after his wife, former avant-garde theater actress and future children's book author Maki Fujiwara (1941–1999), was diagnosed with uterine cancer in 1977 when their son was not yet two (she survived). As for Mr. and Mrs. Sukegawa's domestic tensions, compared to the standoffs and blowouts described in Tsuge's published diaries and Maki's first book, *My Picture Diary* (*Watashi no e-nikki*, 1982), they actually seem pretty tame.

If *The Man Without Talent* is primarily a portrait of a middle-aged man and his family, it is also a portrait of a place: Chōfu and the Tamagawa

River that forms the town's southern border. Over the years, many magazine profiles of Tsuge featured the artist upon the Tamagawa—walking through the high grasses on its banks, sitting meditatively under an umbrella on its concrete embankments, strolling with his family—and today numerous blogs map the sites in the area that appear in this and other Tsuge manga. Following in their tracks, I have bought one broken camera at the monthly Fuda Tenjin Shrine flea market (depicted on page 144) for three hundred yen, and gambled away a few thousand at the Keiokaku Velodrome where Tsuge's wife, Sukezō's wife, and the bird-seller Kurahara's wife worked. I approached, but did not knock on, the door of the apartment in the sprawling Tamagawa Housing Block (Tamagawa jūtaku) that appears at the beginning of chapter one, where Tsuge lived when he drew this manga. I have walked along the Tamagawa River in search of the landscape in which Sukezō whiled his days away. I have stared up at the sluice gates from which the Bird Master flew, and lunched near the spot where Sukezō's stall is depicted. I foraged

Yoshiharu Tsuge at home with his camera collection, with son Shosuke and wife Maki Fujiwara (1981), photograph by Junsuke Takimoto.

Yoshiharu Tsuge as "the modern day Saigyō," on the banks of the Tamagawa River, in *Shūkan Gendai* (November 1991).

Camera Collectors' News (July 1979), containing an early sales ad from Yoshiharu Tsuge. Image courtesy of Mitsuhiro Asakawa.

for rocks, but found none that were handsome enough to take home. Some miles downstream, in upper Kawasaki, I came across a community of bona fide "men without talent" in the form of some two dozen squatter shelters hiding in the scrub. Constructed solidly in plywood, sealed neatly with blue tarps, and in many cases equipped with solar panels, they make Sukezō's ten-foot-square hut look, well, talentless.

In sum, we fans and researchers are obsessed with looking for Tsuge in *The Man Without Talent*, and for *The Man Without Talent* in Chōfu. We are, in other words, enamored with *The Man Without Talent* as one of the premier examples of the "I-novel" (*shishōsetsu*) in comics form, referring to a genre of putatively autobiographical fiction, popular in Japan since the early twentieth century, that typically dwells on the writer/protagonist's struggles with poverty and artistic creation and their less-than-admirable interactions with the opposite sex. "A closely cropped self-portrait" is how one scholar has described the genre, referring to its narrow focus on what

the writer/protagonists experience in their daily lives, with little attempt to flesh out other characters or relate those experiences to a wider social setting.[1] "Narcissistic, self-lacerating, nostalgic, bitter," another, though in many cases that was precisely its appeal.[2] The novels, novellas, short stories, essays, and diaristic writings grouped under *shishōsetsu* have often been assessed with reference to what is known or assumed about the writer's personal life and mental state. The writers themselves often played to those expectations, leading historians to speak of a "myth of sincerity" that has enthroned the genre in an aura of confessional authenticity. Many of its top authors, including Katai Tayama, Naoya Shiga, and Osamu Dazai, enjoyed cult followings in their lifetimes. Tsuge's favorite was Chōtarō Kawasaki, who had been active since the '20s but was not widely known until Tsuge began championing his work in the '80s. (The same fortune was bestowed upon the nineteenth-century poet Seigetsu, who was practically rescued from obscurity by the last chapter of *The Man Without Talent* and now belongs to the haiku canon.)

Though an established genre now, *shishōsetsu*-style manga were largely inconceivable until the comics medium itself gained a broad-based mature readership in the '60s, when Japanese baby boomers entered adulthood and manga authors branched out from fantasy, action, and mystery into more adult and "literary" themes. Tsuge is widely recognized as a pioneer on this front.[3] His "The Swamp" ("Numa"), published in *Garo* in 1966, an open-ended narrative centered around a lone hunter and his ambiguous sexualized encounter with a girl living deep in the hills, has been lauded as the advent of "pure literature" (*jun bungaku*) within manga.[4] He had also begun working with themes central to *shishōsetsu*. "Chirpy" ("Chiiko"), the breakthrough work in this regard, also published in *Garo* in 1966, is about a small-time artist and his live-in barmaid girlfriend, and is based on Tsuge's personal life in the early '60s. Many of his other classic works for *Garo* are narrated in the first person, and many feature another favored *shishōsetsu* theme, solitary travel. Though Tsuge claims to have neither read nor even heard of *shishōsetsu* at this point,[5] he was reading Masuji Ibuse, who, like most Japanese male fiction writers, sometimes wrote *shishōsetsu*-style stories, though he is better known for his folksy and humorous vignettes of country life. Regional history and folklore, the

Yoshiharu Tsuge, "Chirpy," *Garo* no. 19 (March 1966).

classical literature of wandering and recluse monks, and ancient Japanese and Chinese supernatural tales were Tsuge's other main literary influences.

Over the course of the '70s, not only did Tsuge draw more stories based on his personal life, his protagonists also began to look more like him, versus the generic, cartoony leads of most of his *Garo* work. Many of these stories are about his and Maki's life in Chōfu, while others detail his adolescence as a teen working in factories in Tateishi (the working class neighborhood in western Tokyo where many stories by his younger brother, Tadao Tsuge, are set), and his days as a broke cartoonist in the late '50s and early '60s surrounded by scheming friends. His work in this vein helped initiate, beginning in the late '60s, a whole genre of manga focusing on young artists' personal lives. Those by male cartoonists like Seiichi Hayashi and Shin'ichi Abe are probably best known.[6] But female artists like Yōko Kondō, Murasaki Yamada, and Shungiku Uchida (one could include Maki's *My Picture Diary* here, though it's not manga) have also been moved by Tsuge's work to draw from their personal lives, branching out from the usual male themes of art, alcohol, and girlfriends to the care of thankless husbands, children, and aging parents.

After a hiatus of new manga between 1981 and 1984 (the backdrop of *The Man Without Talent*), Tsuge returned to fictionalized autobiography with "Days of Walking" ("Sanpo no hibi," Spring 1984). Drawn by an artist who had spent the summer tempering his neuroses by going on extensive walks and taking daily laps in the city pool, the story is about just that: an artist who spends his days on walks with his small son and finds solace in swimming. When Tsuge, who, like Sukezō, was not inclined to

ask for work at this point in his career, sheepishly presented the finished manga to his former editor at the publisher Nihon Bungeisha, instead of slotting the story into one of their existing periodicals, the publisher decided to create a new magazine, the express purpose of which (much to the introverted artist's chagrin) was to host new work by the legendary progenitor of literary/art manga. Named after a nightmare-eating animal from Chinese folklore, *Comic Baku* debuted in the spring of 1984.[7]

"Days of Walking" was followed by "A Certain Unknown Artist" ("Aru mumei no sakka," Summer 1984). Half inspired by the work of Shin'ichi Abe—who for years had been publishing far more revealing and far less embellished "I-comics" than Tsuge—the story focuses on a failed cartoonist who spends his days wandering around drunk (Tsuge was a teetotaler) with his small son, told from the perspective of a younger, healthier, decently successful friend. Three issues later brought "Selling Stones" ("Ishi o uru," Spring 1985), which essentially merged the two leads of "A Certain Unknown Artist" into a less decadent and more buffoonish single character. It, too, pays homage to Abe: Sukezō's

Comic Baku no. 1 (Spring 1984), cover art by Jun Hatanaka.

Yoshiharu Tsuge, "Days of Walking," *Comic Baku* no. 1 (Spring 1984).

Yoshiharu Tsuge, "A Certain Unknown Artist," *Comic Baku* no. 2 (Summer 1984).

Comic Baku no. 4 (Winter 1985), cover art by Jun Hatanaka based on a drawing by Yoshiharu Tsuge.

daydream of taking over the river crossing and using the kiosk as a studio, though circulating in Tsuge's work as an ideal of reclusion since the mid-'70s, was originally plucked from a story Abe published in *Garo* in 1972, "The Look of Vagrancy" ("Burai no omokage").[8] As Tsuge fleshed out Sukezō in subsequent stories of the cycle that would eventually be combined as *The Man Without Talent*, he gradually packed in more nonfiction from his personal life than in any of his previous manga.

"I'm a fan of literature and tend to read a lot, and not just works of fiction (*sakuhin*), as I also love diaries and chronologies. Sometimes that's all I read," he wrote in the afterword of the 1983 book edition of his selected diaries. "I want to know about the writer's private life and circumstances. Like what kind of illnesses afflicted them, or what kind of house they lived in, what their family structure and economic situation were like. Those are the kinds of things that really pique my interest.

That is also why I like reading *shishōsetsu*, because *shishōsetsu* are reports of the writer's personal life (*seikatsu hōkoku*), so to speak." And the reason why he was interested in writers' personal lives, he explains, is because most of their lives were, like his own, beset by poverty, self-doubt, and neuroses, and because reading about their hardships provided him with "life examples to emulate and the encouragement to find the strength" to navigate his own.[9]

But notice the "so to speak" (*iwaba*) that caps that long quote. *Shishōsetsu* are "reports of the writer's personal life, *so to speak*." Tsuge's *shishōsetsu*-esque manga are rarely, and arguably never, straight transcriptions of his personal life. "Though I was drawing fact," he recalled in the early '90s about his breakout "I-comics" work, "Chirpy," "that differs from a diary in that one pulls together only the important parts of fact and recomposes those fragments. *Shishōsetsu* is ultimately fabrication."[10] Masking this artistry, however, was just as important in creating an effective work and drawing readers into a *shishōsetsu* state of mind. Contrary to the classic view of the genre as a sincere art of crafted autobiography, theorist Masao Miyoshi once described modern Japanese prose fiction (*shōsetsu*) in general as "an incredible fabrication that is nonetheless held up as truthful."[11] Tsuge understood this contradiction well, and consciously played with the uncanny effects it produced.

Yoshiharu Tsuge's Diaries (Tokyo: Kōdansha, December 1983).

Tsuge's version of *shishōsetsu* was never pure. Ever since he began drawing *shishōsetsu*-style manga in the mid-'60s, his work has rarely obeyed the formal conventions of that genre. They are, for one, far more emplotted

Shin'ichi Abe, "The Look of Vagrancy," *Garo* no. 104 (April 1972).

Graphication (May 1975), cover art by Yoshiharu Tsuge.

than notoriously meandering *shishōsetsu*. Unlike the limited, everyday realism of most *shishōsetsu*, most of Tsuge's stories for *Garo* are steeped in the fantastic, the uncanny, and the grotesque. Dreams provided him material until the late '70s, and even his more ostensibly autobiographical works, like *The Man Without Talent*, flirt with magical realism. This was, after all, an artist whose first love was mystery, who immersed himself in folklore and tales of the supernatural before getting into modern literature, and who first engaged themes of travel and the artist's private life while in the employ of a cartoonist (Shigeru Mizuki) who specialized in the phantasmagoric. Especially during the years around and after *The Man Without Talent*, he frequently spoke about the wisdom of Buddhism's insistence on the insubstantial nature of perceived reality and the freedom gained by cutting connections with one's ego through mendicant practices.[12] *Shishōsetsu* critics and writers have historically privileged confessional sincerity as the standard for measuring a work's merit and its author's moral character. But for an artist like Tsuge, who believed that waking life was itself a fiction and that dreams offered their own (potentially deeper, because unmediated) reality, the realist and confessional dictates of *shishōsetsu* could only be read as an exercise in self-deception.

This was, however, precisely the genre's merit. In the fictiveness of autobiographical fiction, Tsuge found his home away from home. In the contradictions of a supposedly sincere and authentic mode of writing, he found what we might call a mode of "stationary *jōhatsu*": a way of disappearing and creating new selves without ever leaving his desk. As he explained recently, "When I write in a *shishōsetsu* style, since I say whatever I wish about myself, people often mistake it for truth. But that itself provides a kind of reality."[13] Or in 1988, speaking about when he first started drawing *shishōsetsu*-style comics in a regular and focused way in the mid-'70s, "I came to enjoy [my stories] being read as fact or close to fact, and the protagonist being imagined as the artist myself. I thought perhaps I could use the style of *shishōsetsu* to confuse fact and fiction, mislead people about what the artist is like, and thereby hide my true identity. Using self-concealment as a means of self-expression might seem twisted, but I am not particularly interested in expressing myself and have always preferred to hide. There is only one way to really do that, however, and that is to stop drawing altogether"—which is exactly what he did in 1987.[14]

Comic Baku, mainstream manga publishing's attempt to revive the spirit of classic *Garo*, folded as a result, after only fifteen issues.

The end apparently did not arrive too early for Tsuge. Despair shades almost every text he wrote while drawing *The Man Without Talent*. Spring 1985, around the time of "Selling Stones": "I can't wait until I am old enough to receive social security. I'm jealous of fine artists, with their cultural honors and pensions from the art academy. The only thing an aging cartoonist can count on is social security. The sooner the better."[15] Spring 1986, upon publication of "The Stone Hunting Trip" ("Tansekikō"): "Again this time, chronic ailments assailed me while drawing. Whenever I picked up my pen, my hand trembled violently, my heart raced wildly with stress, and I felt anxious that my comics were guilty of some atrocious mistake. Once that starts, I feel crippled by all variety of physical symptoms. It's been the same thing over and over since issue two. Maybe it's not manga, maybe I'm at sea from a general loss of confidence. Yet, what is to be made of the fact that the symptoms appear like an allergic reaction every time I set pen to paper?"[16]

Portrait sketch of Seigetsu from childhood memory by Isao Shimojima, from *The Collected Works of Seigetsu Inoue, the Wandering Poet* (Hakutei shobō, 1930).

In the years after *Comic Baku*, Tsuge continued to write occasional travel pieces and submit to interviews, though with lessening frequency. New book editions and movie adaptations of his work proliferated, providing him enough royalties to retire. But without any new manga, people began to wonder if Tsuge, master of the art of disappearance, hadn't gone the way of crazy Seigetsu, wandering the hills or lying

facedown, dead in the mud. In retrospect, the final pages of *The Man Without Talent* certainly look prophetic. Yet given Tsuge's fantastic brand of *shishōsetsu*, where fact and fiction blur and reality is plural, who is to say whether Sukezō's withdrawal was hinting at his creator's plans for imminent retirement or if Tsuge decided to follow the path originally imagined for his avatar?

Not long after Sukezō vanished into the fog, *The Man Without Talent* emerged into the light. The series was first collected into a standalone edition in 1987, as a collected magazine edition supplementing *Comic Baku*. The first book edition, a handsome hardcover with a slipcase, was published in 1988, and saw many reprintings. There have been at least three other editions since. The movie version, actor Naoto Takenaka's directorial debut, won the FIPRESCI (International Federation of Film Critics) Prize at the Venice Film Festival in 1991, instigating a slew of movies based on Tsuge's work and a new "Tsuge boom" widely covered in the press. *Garo* organized a special feature in the film's honor (November 1991), with contributions from many prominent subculturati.

Garo no. 323 (November 1991), special issue on the movie *The Man Without Talent*.

Movie pamphlet for *The Man Without Talent* (November 1991), directed by Naoto Takenaka.

The Man Without Talent, collected magazine edition (Tokyo: Nihon bungeisha, July 1987).

Advice from "The Man Without Talent," edited by Naoto Takenaka (Tokyo: Seirindō, December 1992).

This in turn led to a whole book of playful think-pieces and artistic homages officially titled *Advice from "The Man Without Talent"* (*"Munō no hito" no susume*, 1991), though I prefer the imaginative English on its cover, *The Bible of Nowhere Man*.

If you are puzzled how a deadbeat like Sukezō could be regarded a sage, consider the times. The '80s were the decade in which the Japanese economy seemed unstoppable. White-collar salarymen were compared to samurai in their self-immolating devotion. The real estate of this island nation was supposedly worth more (on paper at least) than the entire United States. Americans smashed Sonys and Toyotas in fear of a Japanese takeover. My parents cackled watching Michael Keaton trying to tame the workplace-fascist Nipponese in *Gung Ho* (1986). Meanwhile, on Tsuge's home turf of manga, on the strength of martial arts titles like *Dragon Ball* (1984–1995) and *Fist of the North Star* (1983–1988), *Weekly Shōnen Jump*—with the guiding slogan "effort, friendship, and victory"—was pushing five million copies a week. Elsewhere, hits like the teenage

comedy *Urusei Yatsura* (1978–1987) and the dystopian sci-fi extravaganza *Akira* (1982–1990) were priming manga and anime to become the international entertainment powerhouses that they are today. It's not hard to imagine that, for most manga readers—hooked as they were on high-action spectacle, muscular trash-talking men, and sassy youths without a serious care in the world—the self-pitying, middle-aged protagonist of *The Man Without Talent* probably seemed a serious drag. So, too, its original publication venue, *Comic Baku*, sales of which hovered around five thousand copies per issue before quickly sinking to two thousand. "A commercial magazine with fanzine level sales," was how head editor Hiroshi Yaku once put it.[17] "Why are we even printing this thing?" he recalls the sales department at Nihon Bungeisha often saying. *Comic Baku*: a loser manga magazine that pinned its hopes on a loser artist who wrote about loser men.

But by the time *The Man Without Talent* was turned into a movie, fissures in Japan's real estate and stock market bubbles were the stuff of daily headlines. The bubble burst at the end of 1991, inaugurating what is known as Japan's Lost Decade. Shinzō Takano, one of Tsuge's greatest supporters as a critic and publisher since the late '60s, and one of his closest friends, set the stage in 1988 when he heralded the manga's embrace of a lower and slower standard of living as "the perfect textbook for seeing through the current conditions of advanced capitalism and middle-class society."[18] The comparatively mild editors of *The Bible of Nowhere Man*, which was published right when the bubble was finally collapsing, threw down the gauntlet thus: "'Do you fight around the clock?' 'Always aim to be one class higher'—these are the kind of slogans that assail one's ears in this information society of ours today, which is nothing but a society of *Men With Talent*. They say that loafers (*puutarō*) and freeters [who float from one part-time job to another] are increasing in numbers. But regardless of whether one is gainfully employed or not, or if one is appreciated as having skills or not, more than a few people have recently awakened to *The Man Without Talent* within themselves. A taste different from simple habitual laziness, it is about taking a vacation from reality."[19] Confident in their disenchantment, many of the volume's contributors echoed a common sentiment: that being *munō* (talentless) is not helpless and shameful, but an affirmative way of life based on using

your skills in ways other than what society deems proper.

Alas, no one but Tsuge seems to have noticed that, especially in a profoundly patriarchal society like Japan, wives and children could suffer dearly if husbands decided to drop out. Though by no means an upholder of progressive gender values (his diary will make you flinch), Tsuge was at least attuned to the negative social ramifications of *munō* and *jōhatsu* in practice, which the contributors to *The Bible of Nowhere Man*—all but one of whom were male—were not. This was probably thanks largely to circumstance: Tsuge, who stayed home even when he was working, spent far more time parenting than most other Japanese men did.

A similar blindness obtains in the many paeans to Tsuge as a modern-day reincarnation of fabled literati ideals. Take this effusive example by critic Saburō Kawamoto for a weekly tabloid in 1991: "Yoshiharu Tsuge's appeal is clean and pure, like that of a hermit who has left the world behind. Only rarely does he produce work or appear before the mass media. As a child he suffered from acute social phobia, and still has a strong aversion to meeting people, and so he prefers hiding in his corner to being in public. He yearns to disappear and go into seclusion, and dreams of living alone in a small mountain village. Inner-city alleys, mountain mineral-spring inns, desolate seaside harbors. It is in such forgotten places that Tsuge finds his Peach Blossom Spring. One thinks of Saigyō's and Bashō's wandering travels long ago. Or the tranquility of Masuji Ibuse's stories. Wrapped up, as we typically are, in our busy daily lives, contact with Tsuge's Peach Blossom Spring provides us feelings of nostalgia and calm."[20]

How far off the mark this is! Since the mid-'70s, Tsuge's work repeatedly explored how these hoary solitary male ideals are compromised—reluctantly but typically for the better—by coupledom and family life. Sukezō's attempted recreation of a wabi-sabi hermitage on the banks of the Tamagawa River is, however heartfelt, clearly ironic. "Tsuge is torn between a desire to abandon the world and knowledge that that is impossible," wrote Kawamoto in a more balanced essay in the pages of *Baku*. "*The Man Without Talent* is a drama of the tension between those two extremes." He also thought the manga's tribute to poverty and failed effort was a "parody of *shishōsetsu*," inspired by the same national affluence many critic-fans denounced as repressive. Crying children and desperate

wives, posits Kawamoto, represent the "real life" that reels Sukezō back in from his "pseudo-grass hut" and riverbank fantasies.[21] But son and wife are clearly more than that. The small nuclear family closed upon itself, regardless of its internal aggravations, is ultimately ballast and refuge for Tsuge. "It's almost like it's just the three of us, alone, in this vast universe," reflects Mrs. Sukegawa on page 140. "Just the three of us, that sounds fine to me..." replies Tsuge's avatar. Indeed, it was these lines, not any of Sukezō's melancholic mutterings or pontificated absurdities, that were adapted as lead copy for the manga's movie version.

Where is Yoshiharu Tsuge? People have tended to seek out his shadows upon the Tamagawa, or in the nooks of once-forlorn hot-spring towns, or lurking in his artwork's hall of mirrors. Instead, even if it contradicts the artist's aura, we might do better to look for Tsuge, as a person and persona both, in the comforts of his own home.

ENDNOTES

1 Edward Fowler, *The Rhetoric of Confession: Shishōsetsu in Early Twentieth-Century Japanese Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. xxiv. My understanding of *shishōsetsu*, and thus how to talk about Yoshiharu Tsuge's career, has been strongly shaped by Fowler's study and Tomi Suzuki's *Narrating the Self: Fictions of Japanese Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996).

2 Howard Hibbett, "The Portrait of the Artist in Japanese Fiction" (1955), as cited in John Whittier Treat, *The Rise and Fall of Modern Japanese Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), p. 100.

3 See, for example, Beatrice Marechal's very serviceable overview of Tsuge's career, "On Top of the Mountain: The Influential Manga of Yoshiharu Tsuge," *The Comics Journal*, special edition, vol. 5 (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2005), pp. 22–8.

4 Kure Tomofusa, "Jun bungaku manga no yukue: Tsuge Yoshiharu o chūshin ni," *Yuriika* (February 1987), pp. 125–6.

5 Tsuge Yoshiharu and Gondō Susumu, *Tsuge Yoshiharu Mangajutsu*, vol. 2 (Tokyo: Waizu shuppan, 1993), p. 38.

6 See my essay "Seiichi Hayashi's Nouvelle Vague," in Seiichi Hayashi, *Red Colored Elegy*, trans. Taro Nettleton, paperback edition (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2018), pp. 237–91; and Asakawa Mitsuhiro, "The Promise and Perils of I-Comics: Shin'ichi Abe's Struggles to Draw Himself with Absolute Sincerity," in Abe Shin'ichi, *That Miyoko Asagaya Feeling*, trans. Ryan Holmberg (Tokyo: Black Hook Press, 2019). These manga fit what is known in the critical literature as the "self-destructive type" (*hametsu-gata*) of *shishōsetsu*.

7 On Yoshiharu Tsuge and *Comic Baku*, see Yaku Hiroshi, *"Comic Baku" to Tsuge Yoshiharu* (Tokyo: Fukutake shoten, 1989). Other *Baku* manga available in English include Katsumata Susumu, "Deep Sea Fish" (1984), in *Fukushima Devil Fish*, ed. Asakawa Mitsuhiro, trans. Ryan Holmberg (London: Breakdown Press, 2018); and Tsuge Tadao, *Tale of the Beast* (1987), trans. Feargal South (Tokyo: Black Hook Press, 2018).

8 Asakawa, "The Promise and Perils of I-Comics," p. x. Abe's "The Look of Vagrancy" is translated in English in this same volume, *That Miyoko Asagaya Feeling*.

9 Tsuge Yoshiharu, "Atogaki," *Tsuge Yoshiharu nikki*, pp. 243–4.

10 Tsuge and Gondō, p. 40.

11 Masao Miyoshi, "Against the Native Grain: The Japanese Novel and the 'Postmodern' West," *Off Center: Power and Culture Relations between Japan and the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 23.

12 See, for example, the interview published in the final issue of *Comic Baku* no. 15 (Fall 1987), Tsuge Yoshiharu and Yaku Hiroshi, "Kojikiron," reprinted in Tsuge Yoshiharu, *Munō no hito* (Tokyo: Nihon bungeisha, 1988), pp. 219–34.

13 Tsuge Yoshiharu and Yamashita Yūji, interview, "Yume no riaritei o motomete," in *Tsuge Yoshiharu: Yume to tabi no sekai* (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 2014), p. 37.

14 Tsuge Yoshiharu, "Maegaki: jisaku kaidai," *Natsu no omoide* (Tokyo: Chūō kōronsha, 1988), p. 7.

15 Tsuge Yoshiharu, "Atogaki," *Tonari no onna* (Tokyo: Nihon bungeisha, 1985), p. 182.

16 *Comic Baku* no. 8 (Winter 1986), reprinted in *Munō no hito* (1988), p. 237.

17 Yaku, p. 11.

18 Gondō Susumu [Takano Shinzō], "'Munō no hito' e no kiregire no kansō," *Tentōsha tsūshin* no. 3 (1988): 19.

19 "Maegaki," in Takenaka Naoto, ed., *"Munō no hito" no susume* (Tokyo: Seirindō, 1991), p. 11.

20 Kawamoto Saburō, "Hyōhaku no tabijin: Tsuge Yoshiharu no miryoku," *Shūkan gendai* (November 1991), p. 8. *The Peach Blossom Spring* is a fifth-century Chinese fable about a remote utopia where people live in harmony with one another and with nature, and was much romanticized by Chinese and Japanese literati over the centuries.

21 Kawamoto, "Inja ganbō: Tsuge Yoshiharu 'Munō no hito,'" *Comic Baku* no. 14 (Summer 1987), pp. 60–2.

The Man Without Talent

YOSHIHARU TSUGE

TRANSLATED AND WITH AN ESSAY BY
RYAN HOLMBERG

New York Review Comics • ***New York***

第一話

石を売る

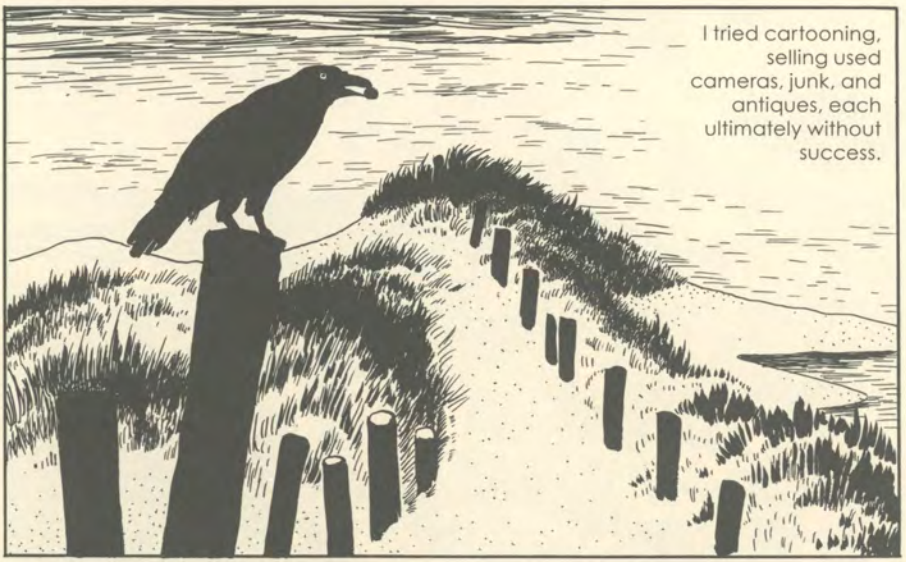
Chapter 1

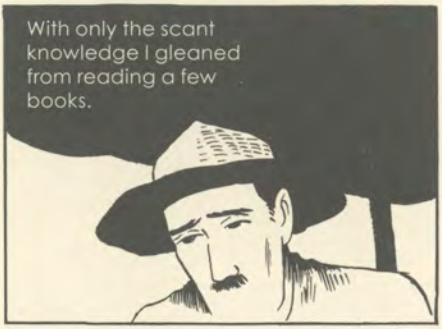
Selling Stones

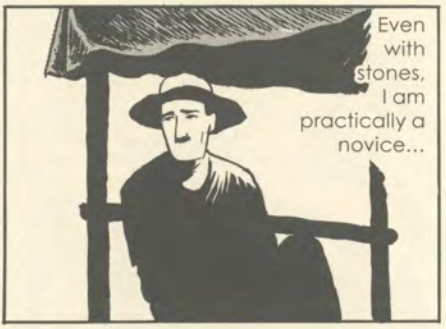
I had no
better ideas.

Alas, I have been
reduced to
selling stones.
石

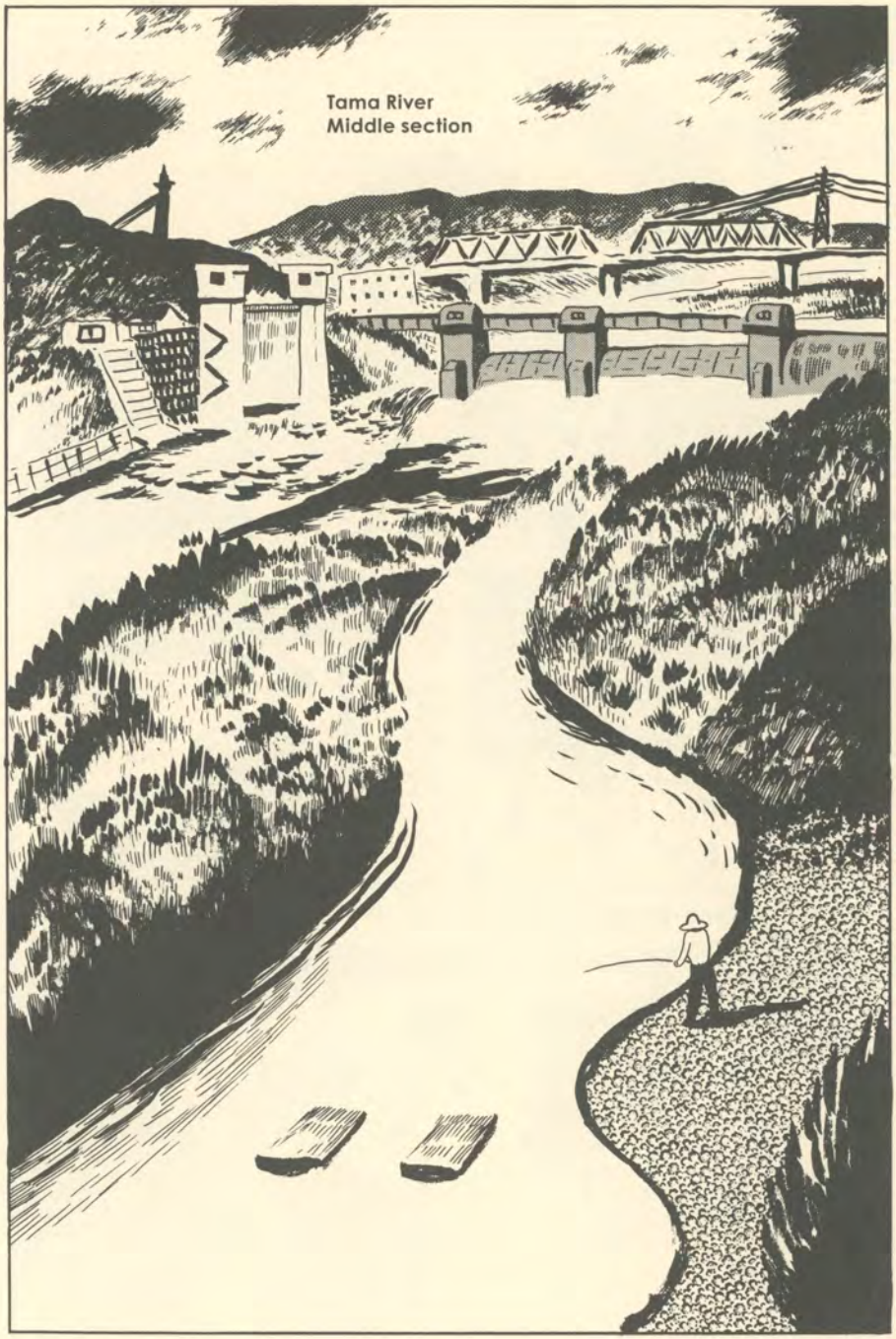
sign: Stones


I tried cartooning, selling used cameras, junk, and antiques, each ultimately without success.

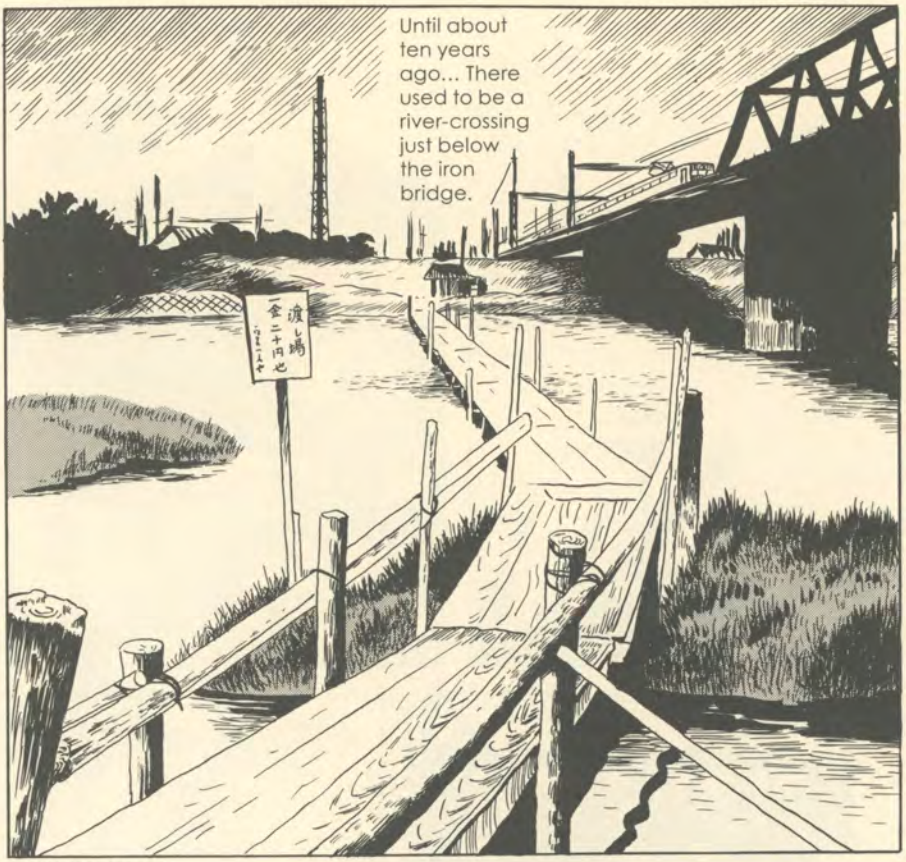

With only the scant knowledge I gleaned from reading a few books.


Even with stones, I am practically a novice...

I think what appealed to me was the fact that stones require no initial investment to speak of.

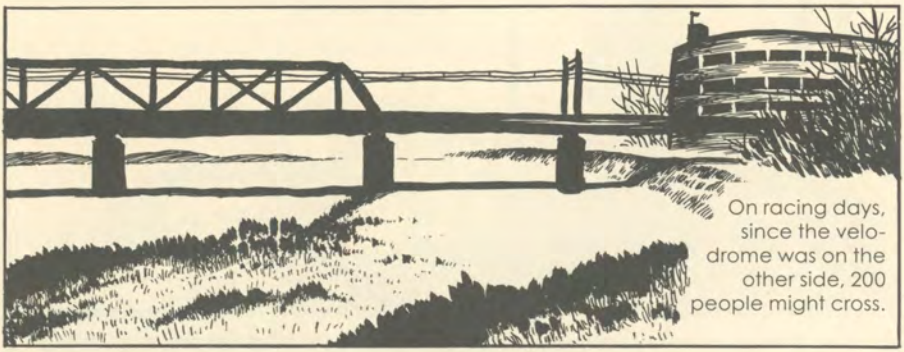

Tama River
Middle section

But don't go thinking I'm about to give up.
We all have dreams.
Yes, dreams...



sign: Crossing 20 yen

Thirty or so people would use it on a normal day.

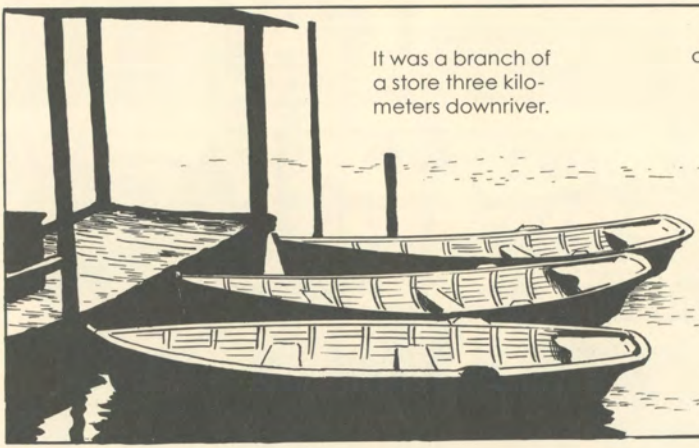

On racing days, since the velodrome was on the other side, 200 people might cross.

Races were held only six days a month.
黑 競
But when the crossing went out of business, the fans from across the river were really put out.

Taking the train only one stop was a nuisance.

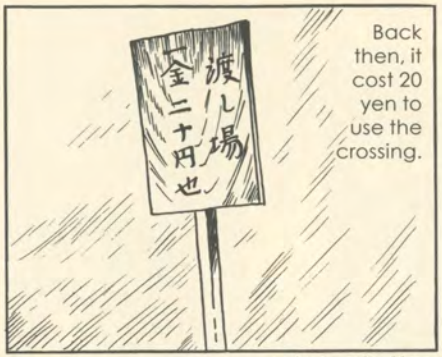
It was a branch of a store three kilometers downriver.

So a few years ago, a boat rental opened up.

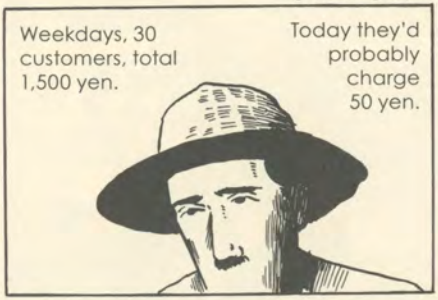


However, in the winter, the boat shop closed for the season, leaving people inconvenienced once again.

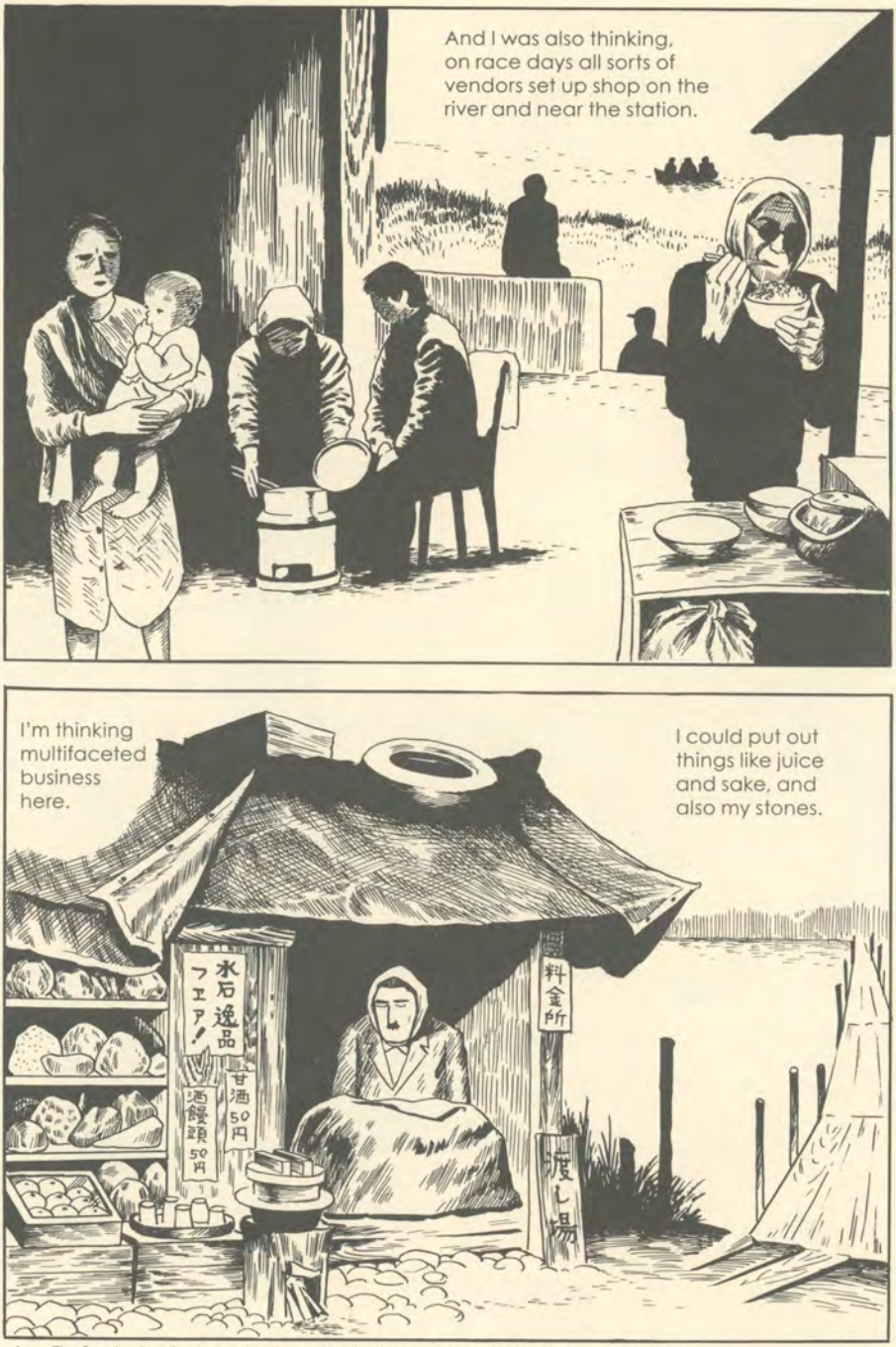
People then started coming over by boat.



sign: crossing 20 yen



All together, 126,000 yen...
Hm, that's your dream?
How's that sound? We sure wouldn't starve.
WHEEZE
WHEEZE
I'll rebuild the crossing. It'll be great.
HURK
HURK
I can't breathe.



signs: The finest art rocks, Amazake 50 yen, Manju 50 yen, Pay here for Crossing

Just listen.
You haven't sold even one yet.
Mmhmm. Stones, huh?
People fishing...
These days, quite a few people come to the river even on days when the track is closed.
Baseball players...
Marathon runners...

There's money to be made there one way or another.
Birdwatchers.
Hmmm, how about when it rains? And the winter? No one goes to the river then.
The neighbors say all that walking is good for my health, but they also barely look me in the eye.
You expect me to hand out fliers forever?
With the 30,000 you get—
Massage them better.
If I have to deliver fliers to all 3,000 apartments in this complex, my legs are going to turn into logs.
Why are you worried what other people think?

Yeah, well, probably all told about a million yen.
So just how much is this bridge going to cost?

I mean, I'm planning to build it myself of course.

You've never even bought me a skirt.
Are you nuts? Where are you going to get that kind of money?

Pssh

I'm serious!

Fill the tub by letting the faucet drip, that way the meter won't go up, you say.

Turn down the gas on the burner, you say.

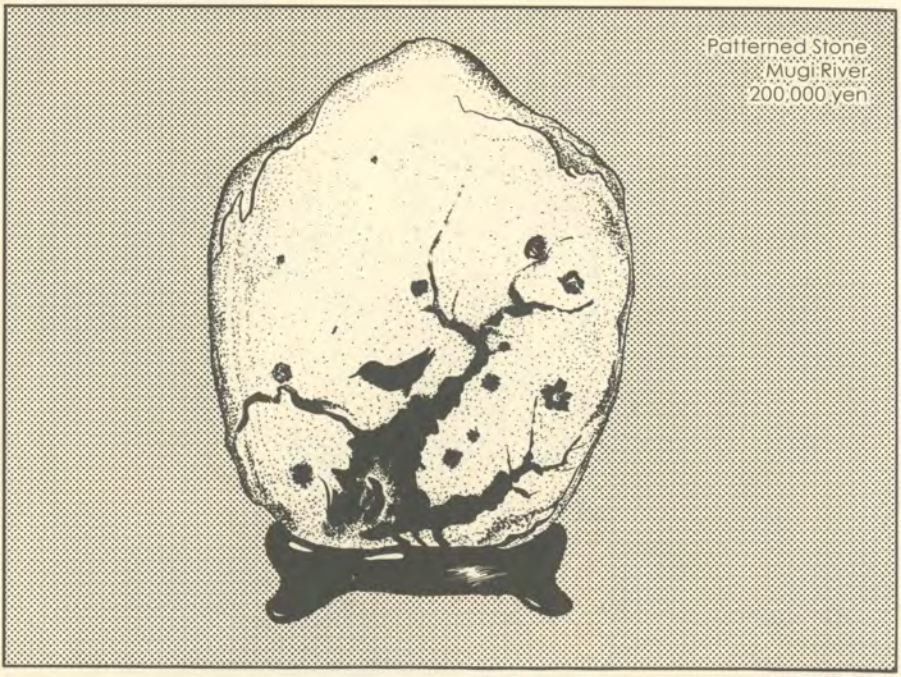
Oh your comics are art, someone says. That goes to your head, and then no one wants to hire you.

What is a penny-pincher like you ever going to achieve?
WHEEZE WHEEZE

When it came to antiques, you were so clueless you would only buy fakes.

When you sold old cameras, you lost people's trust because you used random parts.

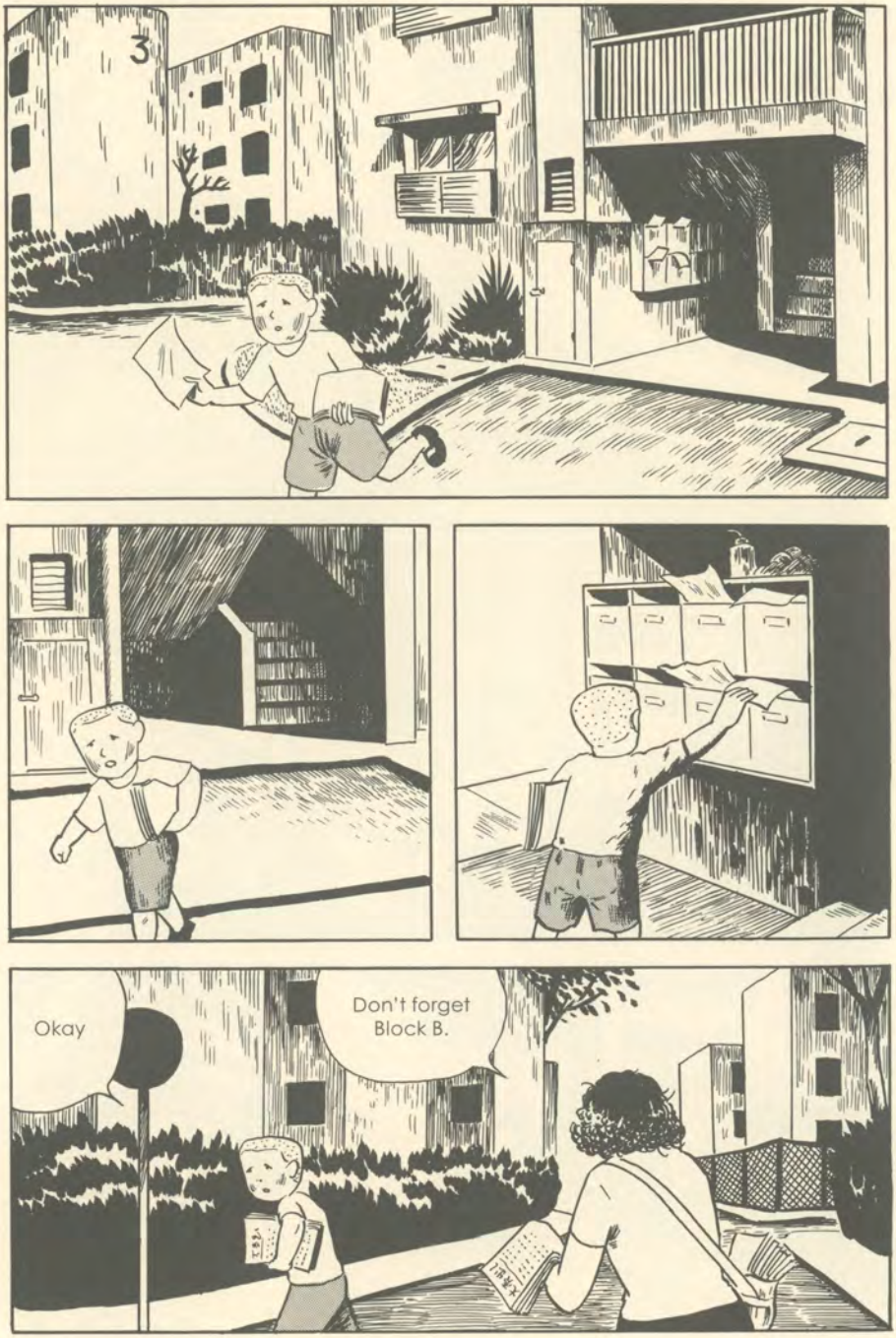
And now it's this bridge. Each idea is worse than the last.
And then stones!
You don't even look the part.
You're lazy and worthless.
WHEEZE
WHEEZE
...
His asthma is acting up

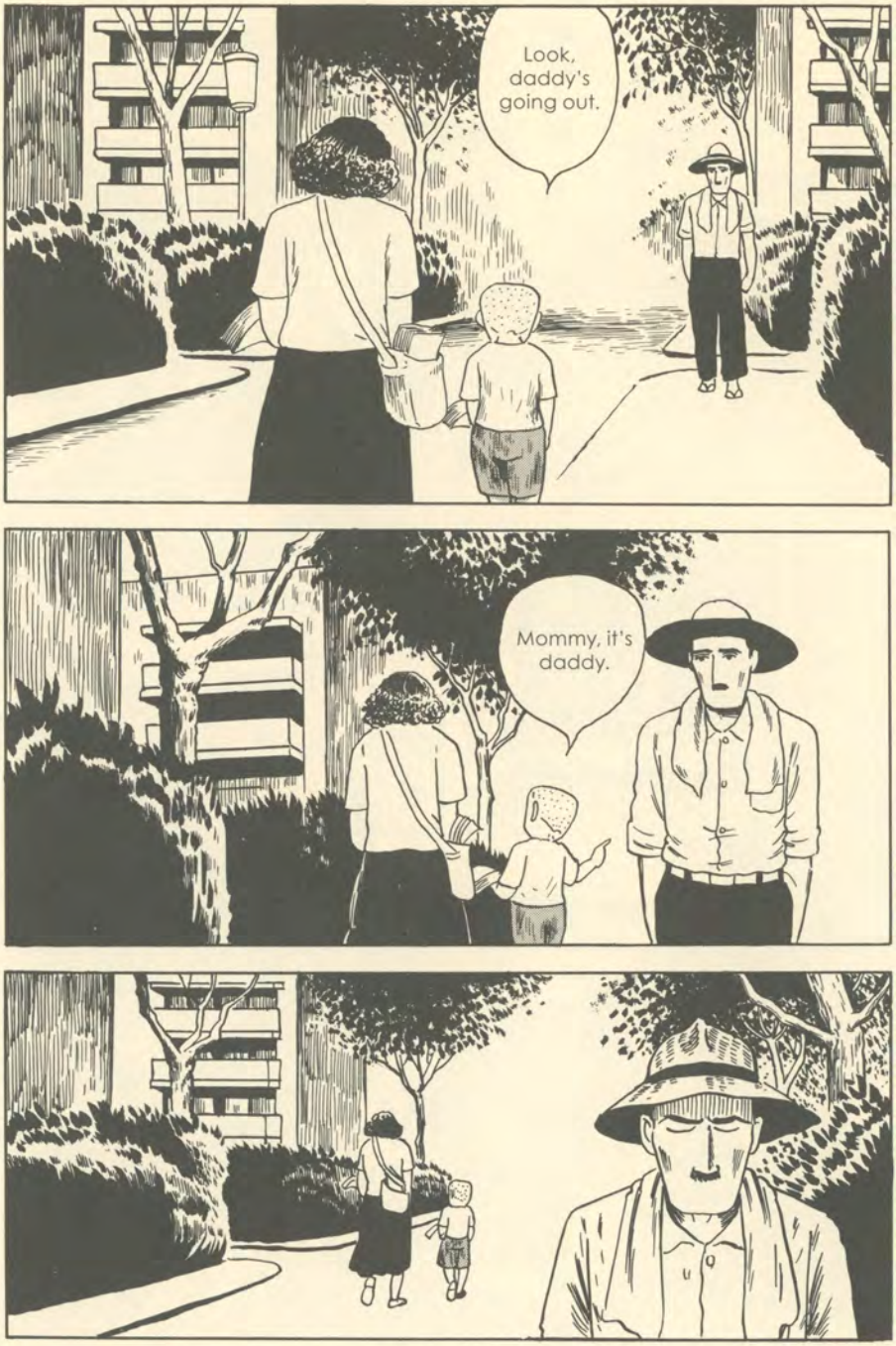

Patterned Stone
Mugi River
200,000 yen

Waterfall Stone
Kamanashi River
30,000 yen

Plum Blossom Stone
Moji, Kyushu
100,000 yen

book: Introduction to Suiseki Art Stones

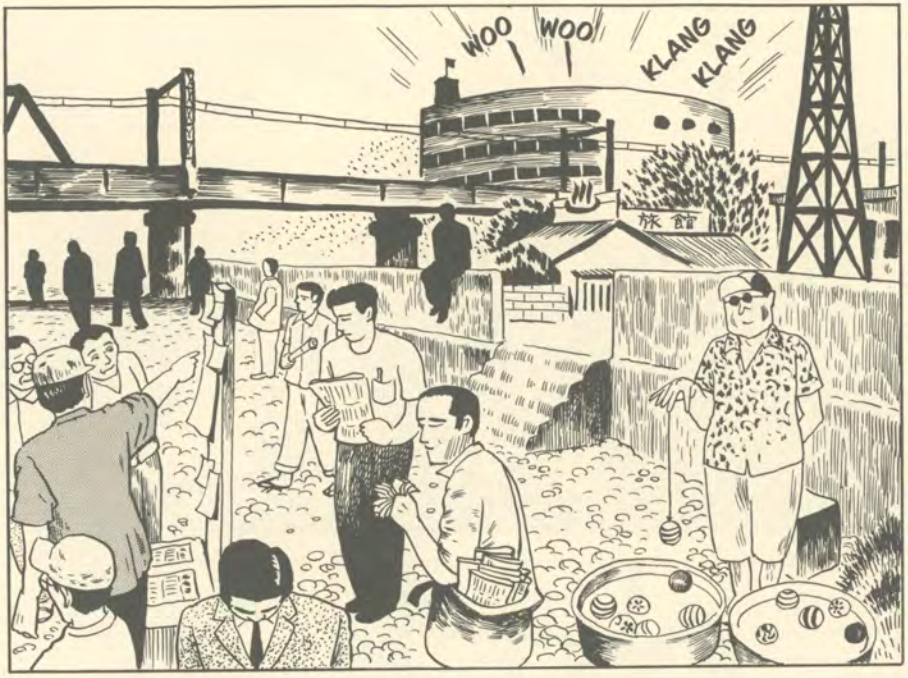

3
Okay
Don't forget
Block B.

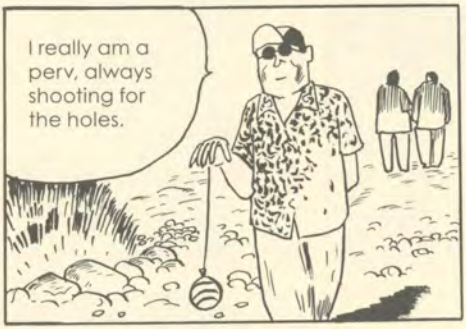

Look, daddy's going out.
Mommy, it's daddy.

She won't even acknowledge me on the street.

sign: Stones

When did she turn into that kind of woman?

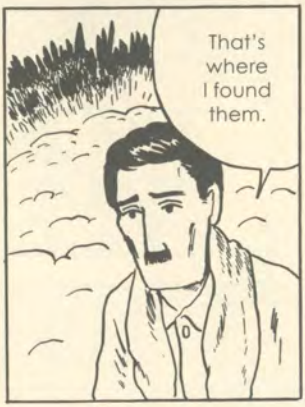

WOO WOO
KLANG KLANG
旅館

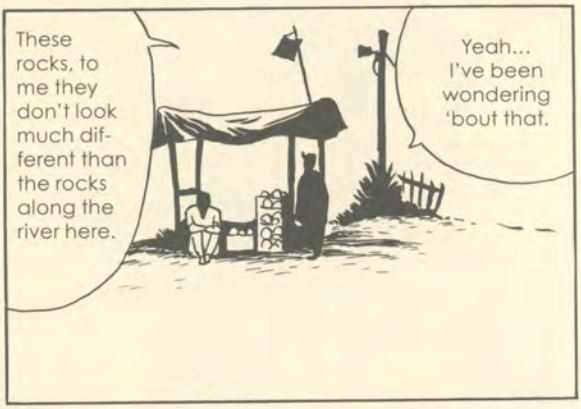

I really am a perv, always shooting for the holes.

Damn! Bust!

Hey, Mr. Stone Seller

I've been here for a year already.
Let's look out for each other, whaddya say?
I just opened up a biz here.

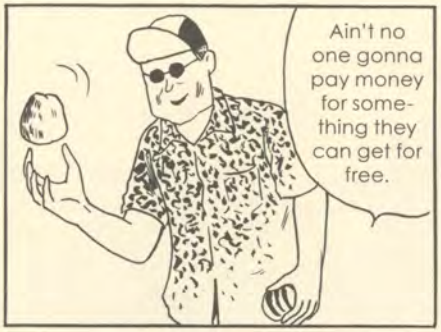

That's where I found them.


These rocks, to me they don't look much different than the rocks along the river here.
Yeah... I've been wondering 'bout that.

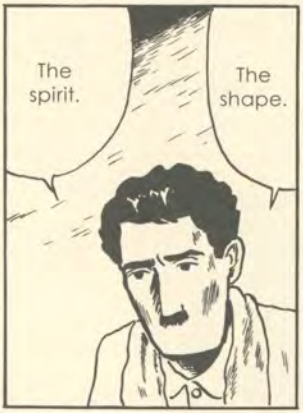
But never nothing that doesn't require a little capital investment.

I've seen people sell all sorts of things.
...

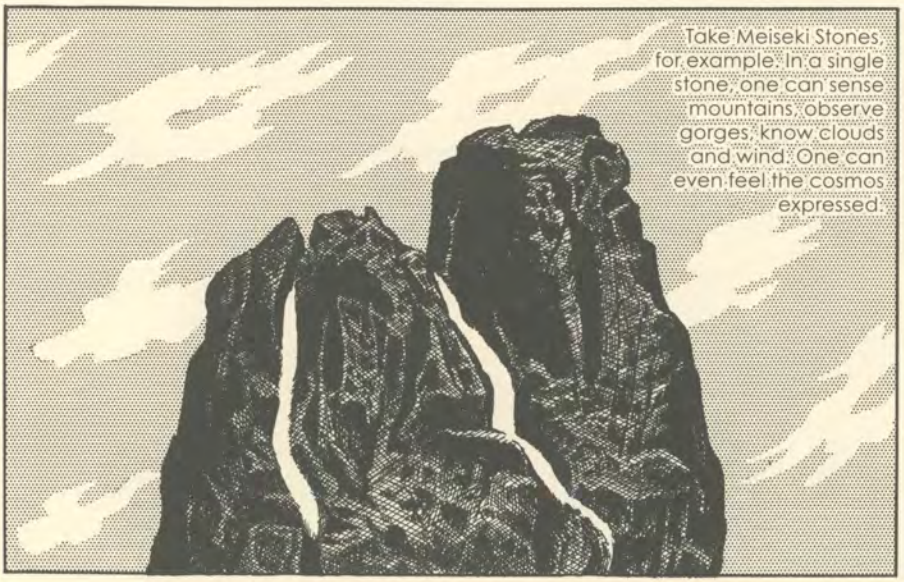
They sell?
Ha! I knew it!


Ain't no one gonna pay money for something they can get for free.

Not sure really how to put this, boss. But these ain't never going to sell.


The spirit.
The shape.

What's different?
Do those stones and these stones look the same to you?


Take Meiseki Stones, for example. In a single stone, one can sense mountains, observe gorges, know clouds and wind. One can even feel the cosmos expressed.

I will have you know that it took me two years to assemble these stones from this vast expanse of rocks.
"Solitary boat"...!
孤舟
5000
You need to put these in the window of an antiques shop or something.
孤舟
5000
Yeah, but location, location.
"Soul"
"Wind"
"Cloud"
靈
風
4000
雲
5000
Ha! Well I'll be damned.
孤舟
5000

"Tears"
"Regret"
You got all sorts.
"Loneli-ness"
"Sorrow"
"An-ger"
Ha! Sounds like me!
Damn it's hot.

CHIRP
CHIRP

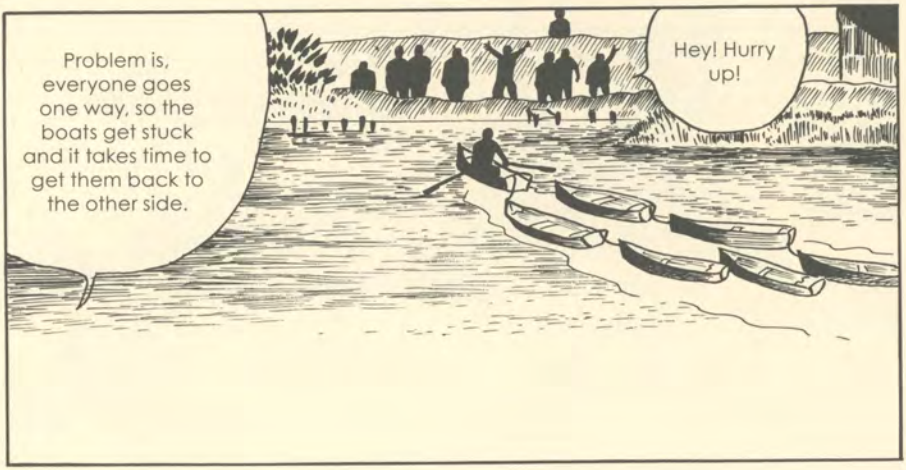
Whoa!

Yup, there they go.

It's shallow enough here.
Shit!
What do those fools expect, four to a boat.

That's some racket the boat rental is running. An hour minimum at 800 yen, but they're across in three minutes.

The station on the other side is way outside of town.
If it's that much trouble, you could just take the train.


Problem is, everyone goes one way, so the boats get stuck and it takes time to get them back to the other side.
Hey! Hurry up!

Hey!
These fellas got some balls!
Got sick and tired of waiting for the boats.

Hey, boss, whatcha doing?
100 yen a person.
Hurry up!

How long you been doing this?
Hee hee. This is weird.
Hey now, boss!
Huff Huff
Don't go crazy now.
Hold on!

11,
12...
8, 9,
10...
KPLINK
KPLINK
Daddy

It's time to go home.
KAW KAW
Is it safe to leave the stones out like that?
It's fine. No one's going to steal them.

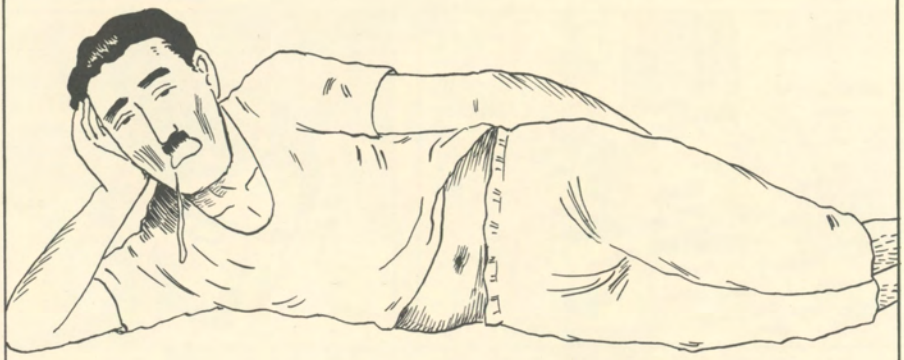
It means that person is small and worthless.
Ha ha ha...
Daddy, what's it mean when someone's a worm?
LI-LIN
LI-LIN
Mommy said that's what daddy is.
Where did you hear that?
MWA-HAHA
MWA-HAHA
...
Yup, daddy is like a worm.

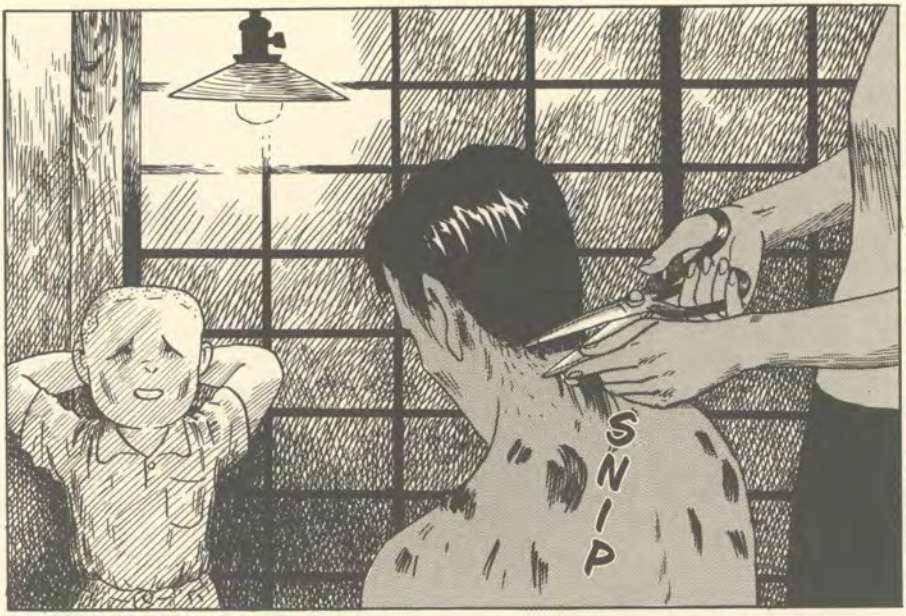
第二話

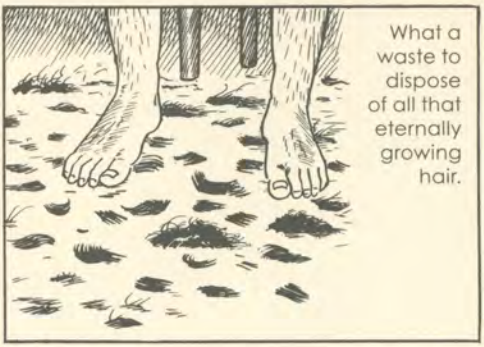
Chapter 2

無能の人

The Man
Without
Talent

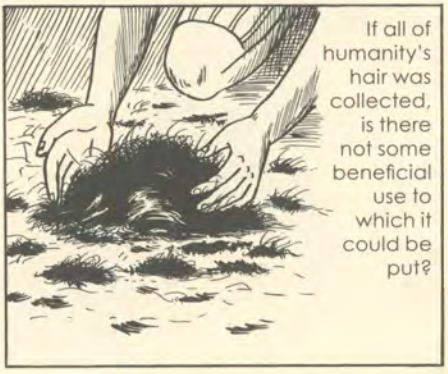


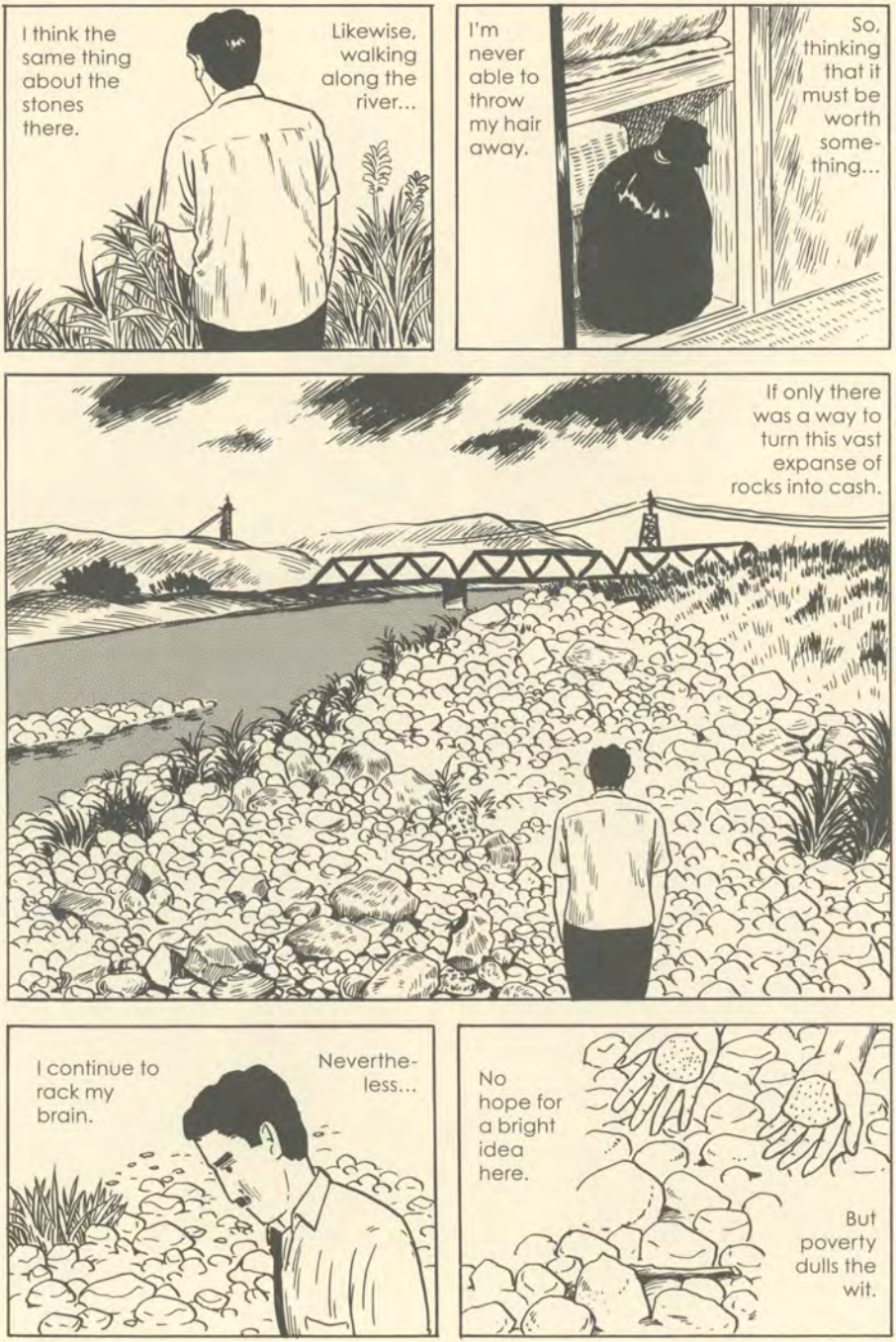

SNIP

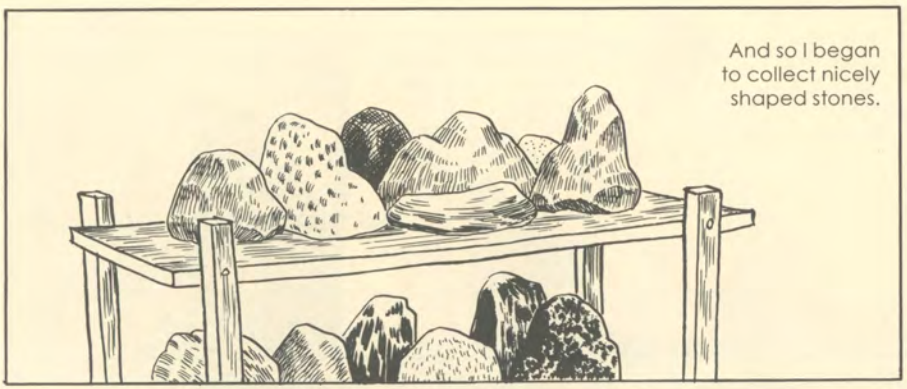

What a waste to dispose of all that eternally growing hair.

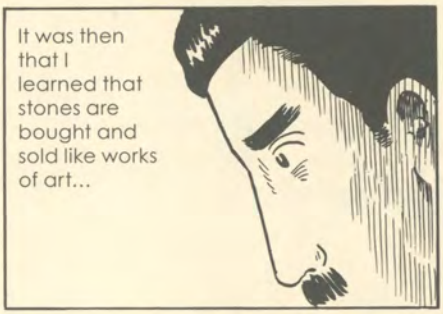
Getting a haircut always makes me wonder about some-thing.

Such a discovery would make someone filthy rich.
Like if eating it could cure cancer or hemorrhoids.

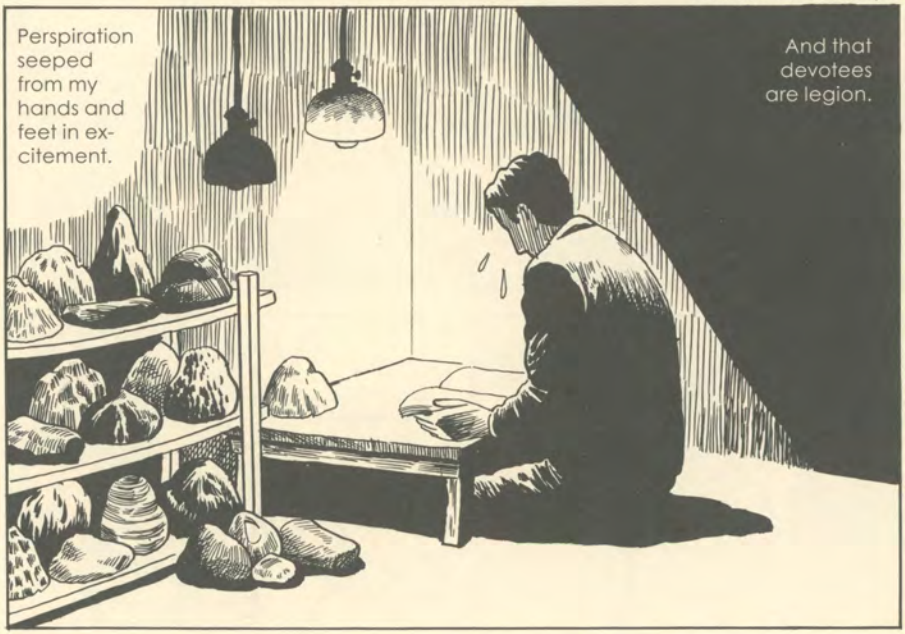

If all of humanity's hair was collected, is there not some beneficial use to which it could be put?


I think the same thing about the stones there.
Likewise, walking along the river...
I'm never able to throw my hair away.
So, thinking that it must be worth something...
If only there was a way to turn this vast expanse of rocks into cash.
I continue to rack my brain.
Nevertheless...
No hope for a bright idea here.
But poverty dulls the wit.

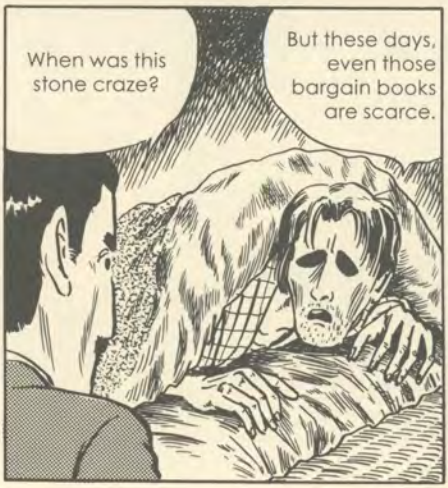




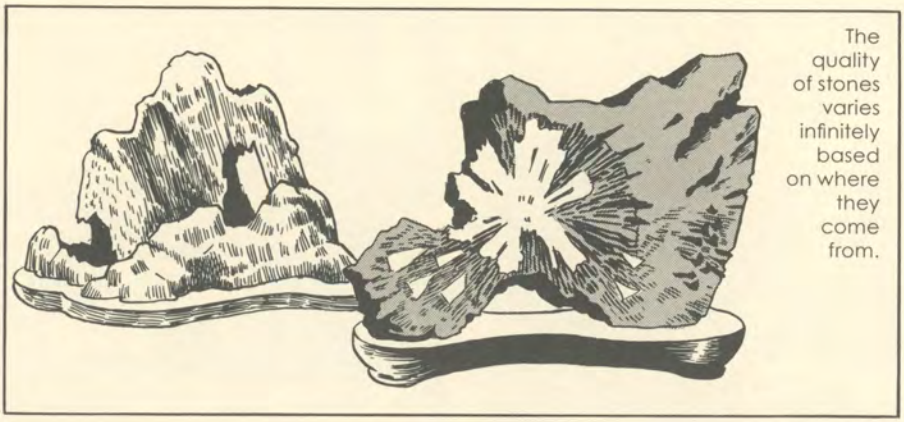
book: Suiseki Stone Hobbyist

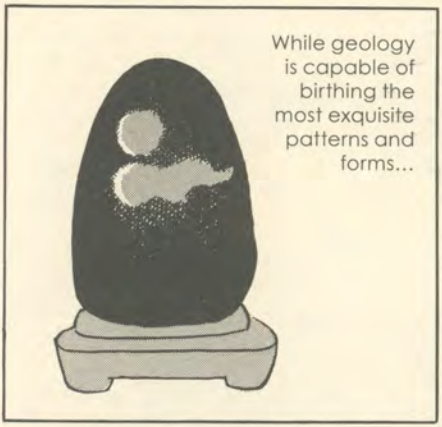


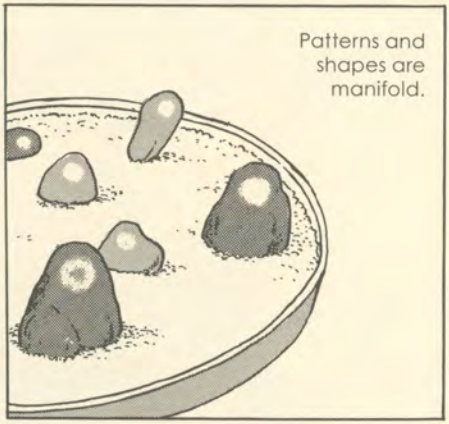
sign: Yamai's Vintage Books



book: *The Stone Hunter's Guidebook*


The quality of stones varies infinitely based on where they come from.


While geology is capable of birthing the most exquisite patterns and forms...


Patterns and shapes are manifold.

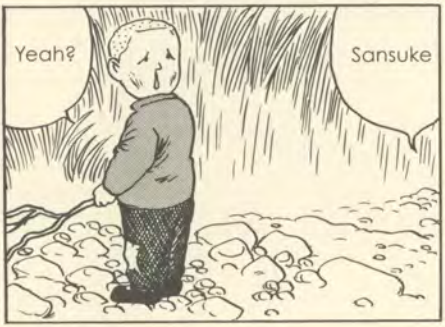
Some locales offer nothing at all.

So I was stuck scouring rivers nearby.
I don't have the money to travel to any of the famous sites...
I guess I'll never find any chrysanthemum or waterfall stones around here.
Nevertheless, after two years I had amassed quite a collection.

I had no money to rent space in town.
I opened shop
Despite fights with my wife...

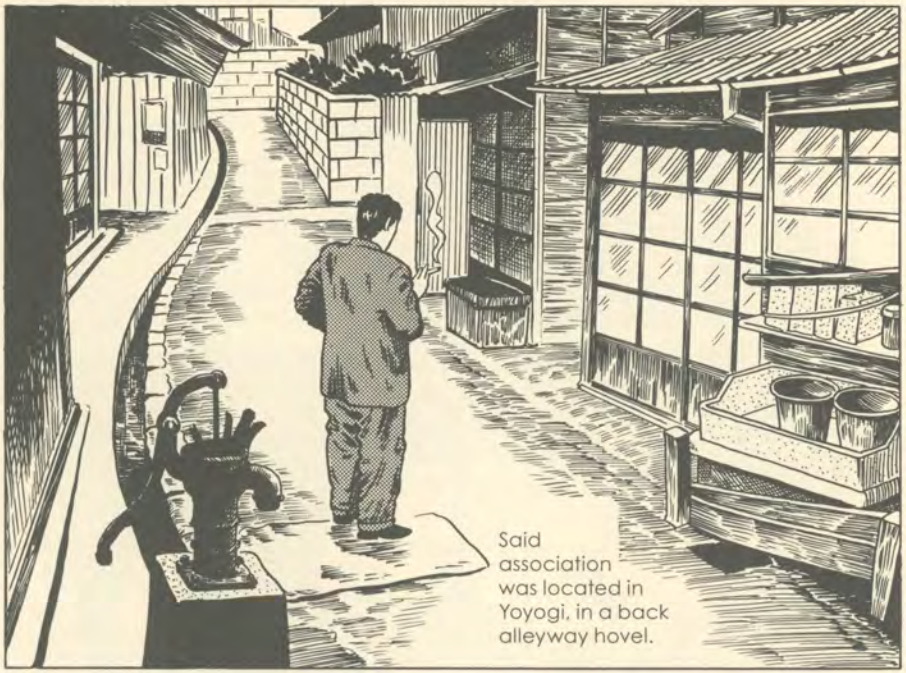
Well, it's still cold, not many people are out.
Why don't they sell, daddy?

HONK
Here.


Yeah?
Sansuke

book: *Art Stone News*

ad: *The 24th Art Stone Swap Meet, 1000 yen admission (includes lunch and beverage)*

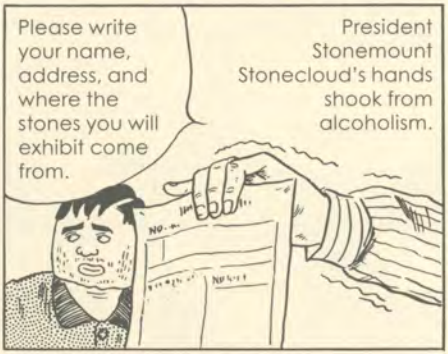


sign: Art Stone Fanatics Association

TUNK
TUNK
Would you mind fixing it?
The doorsill is rotted. The nails won't stay in.
My apologies. The man of the house is useless in such matters. Please come in.

This is my disciple, the famed stone hunter of Koshu, Mr. Yamakawa Lightstone.
Nice to meet you.
I wasn't the only guest.

Most of them come from the Tama River.


Please write your name, address, and where the stones you will exhibit come from.
President Stonemount Stonecloud's hands shook from alcoholism.

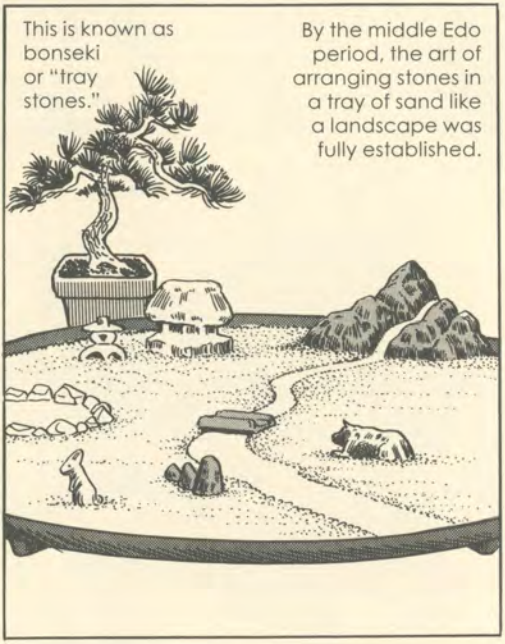
The nameless can become famous in the blink of an eye.
Don't worry. Found stones are perfect for auctions.

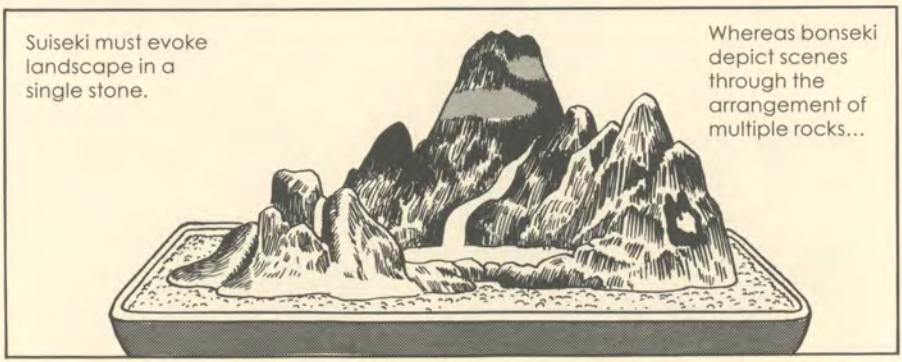
None that you bought, I assume.
So you found them yourself.

I can imagine, coming from the Tama.
I am but a novice. Compared to these magnificent stones...
Once the Kamo in Kyoto, now the Tama, they say.
I stonehunt near the Nikkatasu film studio.
Downriver stones are too round and boring.
The texture of stones depends on where in the river they come from.
But that refers to stones from upriver.
We walked from the velodrome station.
Oh yes, I've gone hunting there.

This in turn came from Chinese scholars' rocks.
The aesthetic appreciation of stones dates to the Ashikaga Era, in the 14th century.
Sensei Stonecloud commenced to lecture.

In contrast, the appreciation of single stones is known as suiseki, "landscape stones."


This is known as bonseki or "tray stones."
By the middle Edo period, the art of arranging stones in a tray of sand like a landscape was fully established.

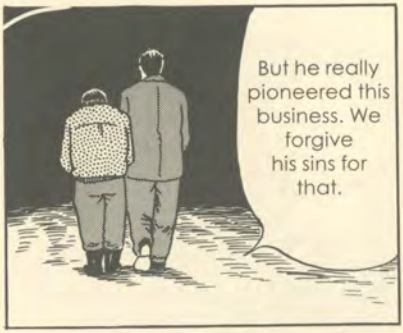

Suiseki must evoke landscape in a single stone.
Whereas bonseki depict scenes through the arrangement of multiple rocks...

But that is heresy!
Some people cut and polish their stones.
Suiseki honors the beauty imparted by nature herself.
Bonseki is nothing more than a sleight of the human hand.
And that is why suiseki are the very epitome of beauty.
Yeah but...
Human artifice can never reproduce the textures, the colors, the forms born from the passage of millions, nay, billions of years.
Try as they may, human hands can never match the beauty of nature.
Ahem, ahem
Therefore...
Good and bad stones are judged by aesthetic categories invented by man.

As I was saying, there are four types of suiseki.
Indeed, it is as you say, sensei.
As naturally produced forms resembling landscape, these are the most popular suiseki.
Mountains, gorges, lakes, and the like.
First, landscape stones.
Just look at the red of this rising sun stone.
Third, chromatic stones, which celebrate the beauty of the stone's colors.
Second, pattern stones. Flower petals, birds, butterflies, the moon, and the like can be seen on the surface of the stone.

These figurative stones...
Here sir.
Thing is...
Fourth, figurative stones, which resemble animals, boats, and other objects.
They are vulgarity in the extreme... They lack elegance and poetry.
SPISH SPISH
Nothing could be further from the refinements of landscape. They are mere oddities and curiosities.
Hoo hoo hoo hoo
Hoo hoo
Hoo
But I must say, this one here, the way it takes to getting wet... I have never seen anything quite like it.

I don't know how many times I've heard that lecture.
Sensei's collection must be worth a fortune.
Pricey stones don't exactly fly off the auction block.
They're all on consignment from people like us.
Actually, none of those stones are his.
Welcome to the jungle, pal.
You're lucky if you ever get paid.
And not only will he screw you on the commis-sion...
So sensei uses his reputation to get doctors and lawyers to buy them.


But he really pioneered this business. We forgive his sins for that.

Things are bleak.
It ain't like the golden days.

How 'bout a drink?

酒

As a token of our new friendship.
No, I...

Hold on!
I'm in a rush.

Hey!
Hey!
I got money, y'know.
She's a quick worker.
Beware of sensei's wife.
But listen.
Sensei has booted out at least five guys on her account.
She's an easy piece of ass, even for this industry.
And boy, does she have her eye on you.

A bath-house?
She and her former husband used to run a bath-house in Koshu.
That's to be expected.
Not much doing down there since sensei took to the bottle.
One deep in the mountains. They were poor. They hardly ever had customers.
He stayed for two, three days.
Then sensei came along on a stone expedition.

Her husband was me.
Truth is...
Then stole away with the bath-master's wife.
WAAAA
Our life in the mountains was miserable. We trapped snakes, made bird nesting boxes and disposable chopsticks
Before I knew it, he was teaching me rocks.
Time and again, I went to sensei's to get her back.

Just last night, he made me clean the toilet in exchange for spending the night.
So until I can make a living with stones, I do as sensei tells me.
BOO HOO HOO
I don't know if I'm his wife or his servant!
Come to Koshu some day. You'll find nice waterfall stones on the Fuefuki River.

I wonder how much they'll sell for? Minus the 10 percent commission...
I had to wait a whole month until the auction.
I haven't seen them much at department store shows either.
Maybe, like me, they're just too sub-dued.
Tama River stones don't appear much in print, so I have no idea what they go for.

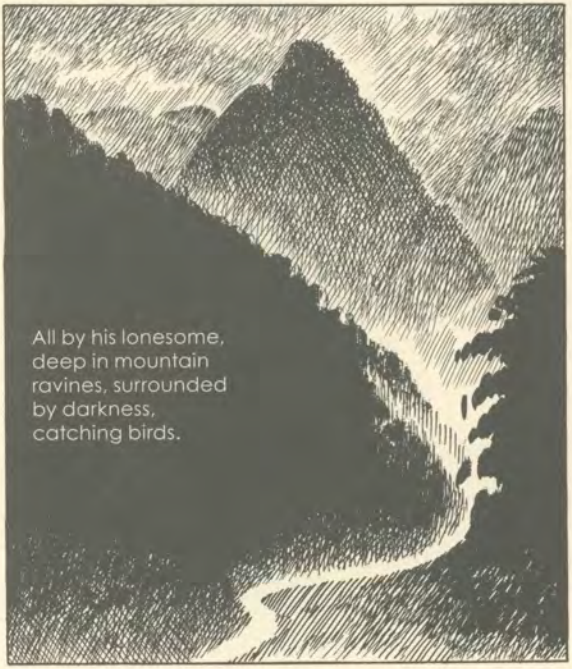
I—I see.
I called your house. They said you were at the river.
Madam!
I've been here before. I knew where to find you.
BLUB
ZBLUB
I must have had too much water...
Please take your time.
Shameful, that's what it is.
How surprising that someone would open a business in a place like this.

Is there no future in it?
Things weren't bad ten years ago...
Why did you decide to get into stones now?
Less than half of them are alive today.
A census of stone hobbyists was done ten years ago.
It's a hobby of the aged.
And there's no one young to take their place.
Old men die, after all...

You sure know your birds.
I am, after all, a birdmaster's daughter.

Look, a bunting.

A green-finch, a thrush


All by his lonesome, deep in mountain ravines, surrounded by darkness, catching birds.

My father caught birds in the country.

This area is crawling with couples at night.
Ew
Oh my!
Now that you say that, there sure are a lot of love hotels here for being off the beaten track.
I suppose the old inns and restaurants have turned into love hotels.
Once upon a time, this area was popular for flower viewing and pleasure boats. You could even catch eels.
And dinner perhaps? Darling?
How do you feel about resting?
It was chilly on the river.

Isn't it time for you to close up shop anyway?
旅館
Daddy
Time to come home.

Some 40 people attended the auction.
H Temple Shinjuku
勝股杯
末長杯
加治井杯
近東杯
白田中杯
山多胡
Prior to the bidding, the stones were set out for viewing.
Finding that money was no mean feat.
The exhibitor's fee was 10,000 yen for a one square meter space.

Honey, other people's stones look really nice.
You get lunch and tea.
You make it sound like we're robbing you.
2,000 is plenty.
Sorry, can you just pay the 3,000?
They want more?
Okay.
Mr. Sukegawa, I don't believe you've paid the 1,000 yen a head entry fee.
受付
I don't like that woman.
2,000 should be more than enough, since my son doesn't eat much.

Mr. Lightstone from Koshu served as sensei's obsequious assistant.
The bidding began.
5,000! No one for 5,000?
Baby Fuji, Sakawa River
Mmmm 3,000 yen.
Triple Wave Stone, Kanna River
They are probably men like me, peddling and flipping found stones.
I imagined stones as being a hobby of the wealthy, but the men in attendance were each shabbier than the next.
2 0 0 0 !
The bids were stupidly low.

Well, there's hardly anyone here.
Not one yet over 10,000!
That wonderful stone, so cheap?
Husband and Wife Stone, Kamanashi River, 4,000 yen.
Where's mine?
They couldn't do better than a cheap bento?
My turn was in the afternoon, after lunch.
He did.
Sansuke won't eat all of his.
Miss, would you mind going to buy more bento?
Fork it over!
I'm about to make serious money! What's another thousand?
BANG

We're short five.
The shop just over there is fine.

Why do I have to go?
Watch your mouth.

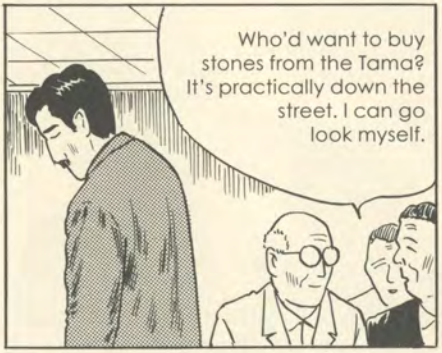
So you skim off the other 500?
But nothing over 500.

She must be very busy.
Pisses me off.

I found her sulking outside.
My wife never came back.
I found some for you.
Daddy, look at all the rocks.
Misfortune
I got our fortune from the shrine.
凶
Misfortune
凶
Misfortune

Here sir.
As the end approached, my turn finally came.
LUB-DUB
LUB-DUB
Next, Tama River Stones.
Boat Stone, Tama River, 2,000.
1,000!?!
1,000 yen.
Cool it, newbie. Leave the opening bid to sensei.
I priced that one at 5,000!

How about 4,000 then?
PANG
You're not broke. Let's have it.
Do I hear 5,000?
In that case, for the next one let's start at 5,000.
P-PANG
Fine, then 2,000!
Oof. You're right.
Since when do bids decrease at an auction?
What is this? Are you selling old bananas?
Let's hear it.
A meager 1,000.
Next, 1,000 yen.


Who'd want to buy stones from the Tama? It's practically down the street. I can go look myself.

That's it for Tama River. Next!

Sounds like a wake in here.
Not even a cough?

You're not seriously going to mail them back, are you?
Thus ended the auction.

banner: Drive safely

What is wrong with you?!
I hate them! I hate them!
Cameras, antiques, you never take anything seriously!
I can't take it anymore! You cause me nothing but pain!
Why do you do this? Why?
You fail on purpose!
Waah Waah!
Comics are the only thing you're good at!

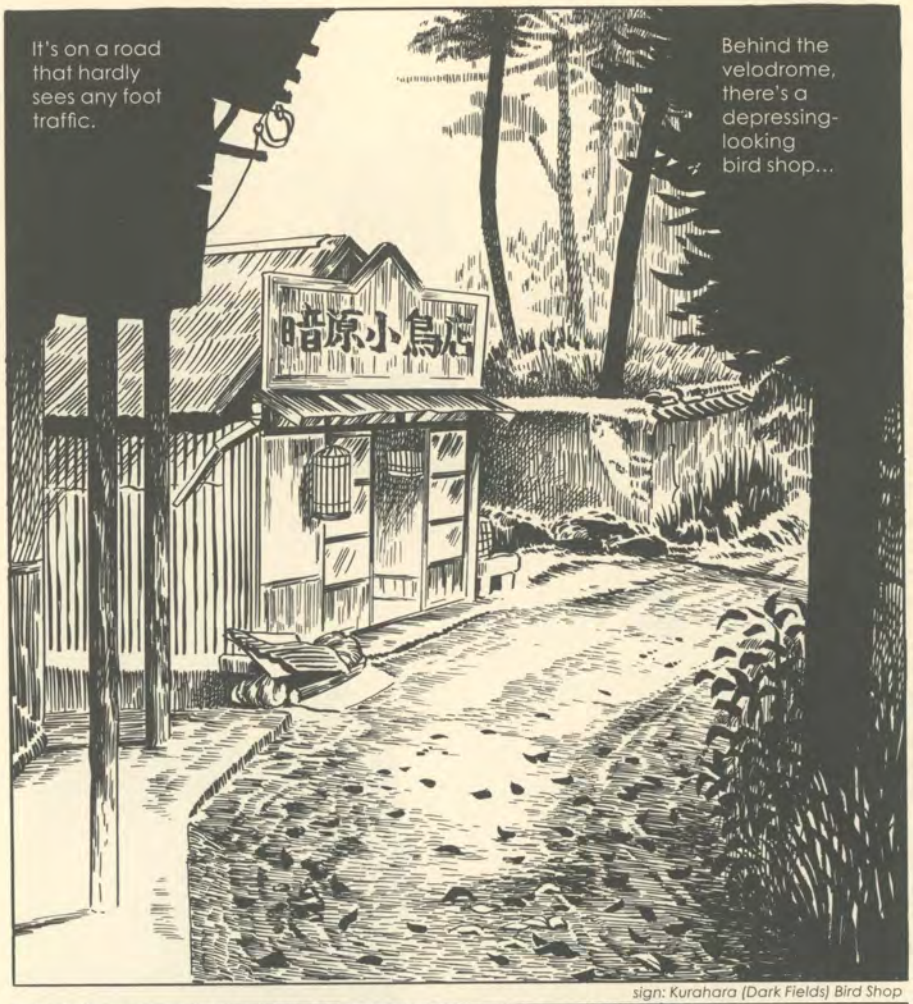
Just draw, please.
So what if no publisher has asked you to?
Please, just draw...
Why? Why? Why?
Why are you so stupid?
BONGGG

第三話

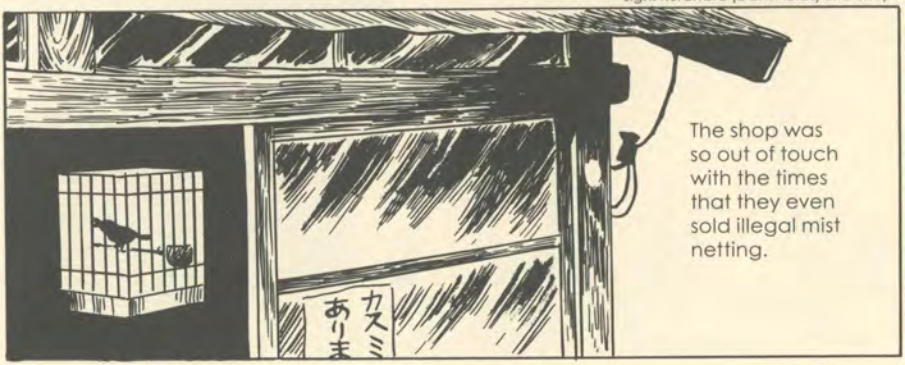
Chapter 3

鳥師

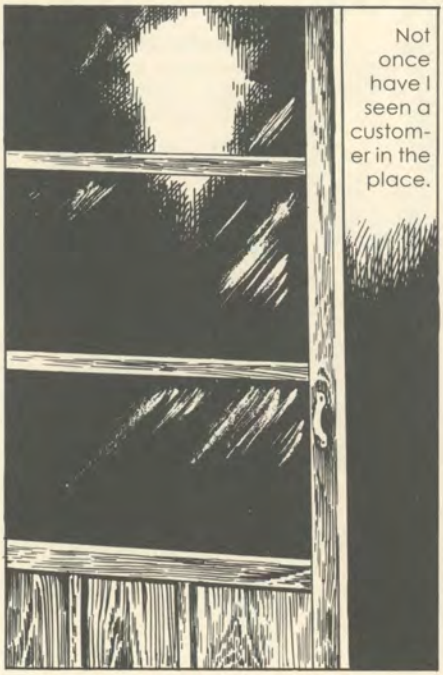
The Bird Master



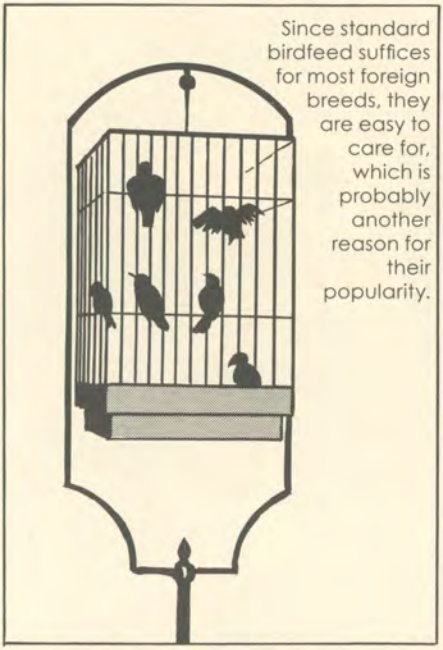
sign: Kurahara (Dark Fields) Bird Shop



There were never more than 5 or 6 birds inside the gloomy shop...

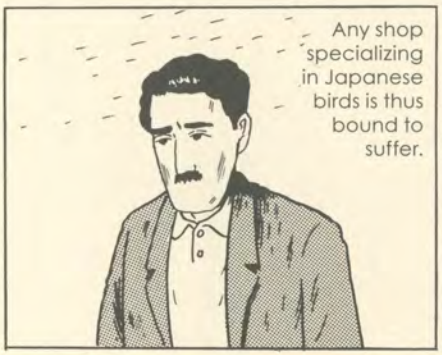

Not once have I seen a custom-er in the place.

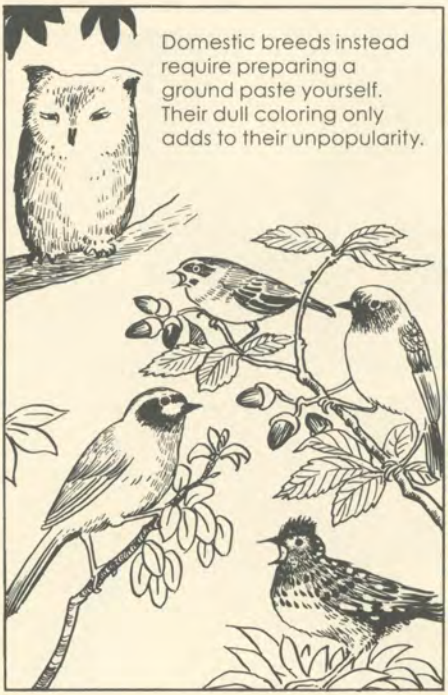
And they were always bush warblers, skylarks, white-eyes, or other domestic birds whose care was a total hassle.

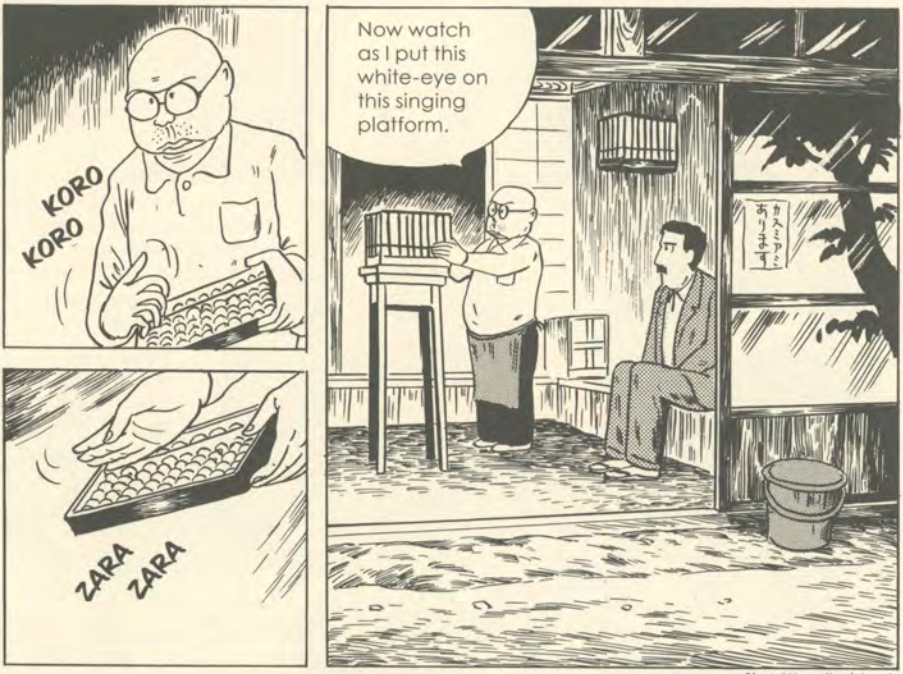

Since standard birdfeed suffices for most foreign breeds, they are easy to care for, which is probably another reason for their popularity.

These days, pet and bird shops try to outdo one another with the bright colors of imported parakeets.

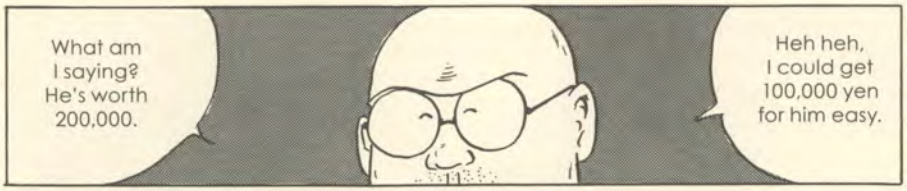
Due to protection laws, moreover, there are only seven breeds you can keep as pets without special permission.

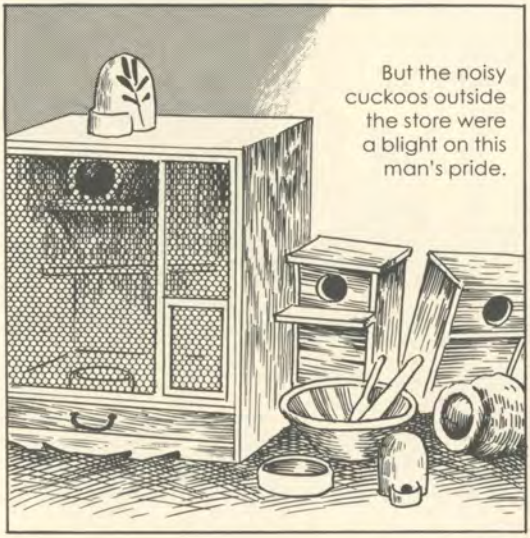

Any shop specializing in Japanese birds is thus bound to suffer.

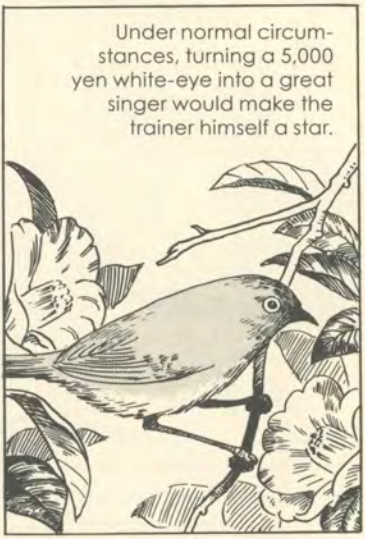

Domestic breeds instead require preparing a ground paste yourself. Their dull coloring only adds to their unpopularity.

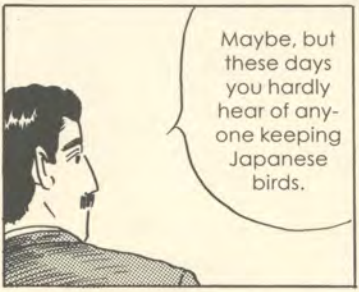


Sign: We sell mist nets


What am I saying? He's worth 200,000.
Heh heh, I could get 100,000 yen for him easy.

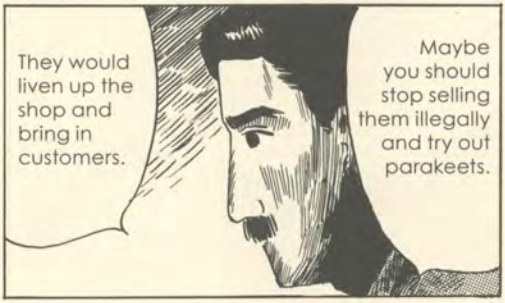

But the noisy cuckoos outside the store were a blight on this man's pride.


Under normal circumstances, turning a 5,000 yen white-eye into a great singer would make the trainer himself a star.

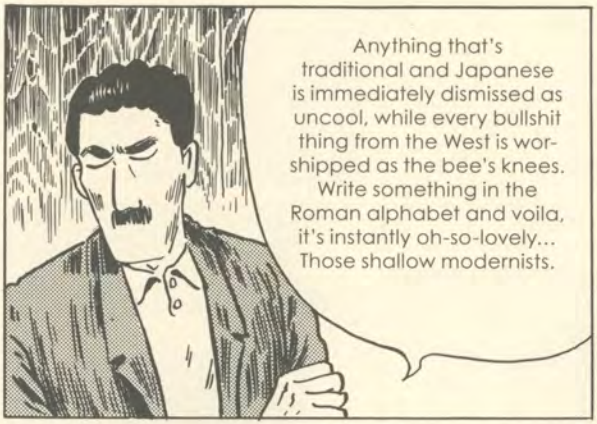

Maybe, but these days you hardly hear of anyone keeping Japanese birds.

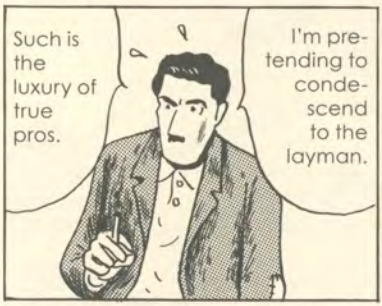
What do these amateurs today know?
True bird whisperers have always chosen domestic breeds.

Playthings for women and children, that's all they are.
Ugh, parakeets? Those gaudy show birds?

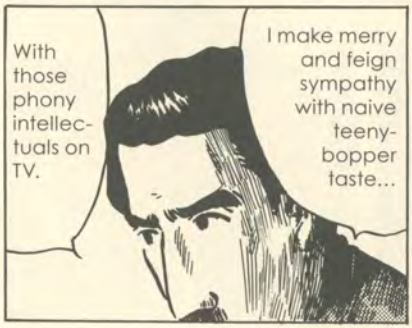

They would liven up the shop and bring in customers.
Maybe you should stop selling them illegally and try out parakeets.

Such vulgar birds.
Oh god, spare me.
I hear that parrots and myna are also hot.
OHTAKE-SAN
Don't get me wrong. I'm a man of taste. I recognize the superiority of Japanese birds.
Their delicate refinement.
Their poignant beauty, their reserved grace.
True, but the layman reigns supreme these days. People are satisfied with showy appearances and care not to seek the inner truth of things.
That's what the average person doesn't understand.
Deep and profound.
Modest and self-effacing.





sign: Stone Hunting, the Hottest New Thing



Respect the self, respect individuality, they say, while running amok in their egotistical Occidental get-ups. No wonder divorce rates are on the rise!
BANG
Every last one of them tries to justify their own charlatanism by appealing to self-serving ideals like democratic taste, which only serves to pull the wool over people's eyes and obscure the true essence of things. Self-reliance and self-critique have been sacrificed to self-indulgent self-assertion. No wonder the world has gone mad.
Little do they understand what riches lie in crushing the ego.
Divorce!
PFFRRT
Only Oriental philosophy, with its infinite profundity and boundless reach, offers any hope of saving mankind.

...
I'd heard she left you.

Listen to this non-sense.

GRRWOAR
Your wife is here?

She was horribly embar-rassed, and took it out on me.
PKONK

The missus was out of clean drawers, so I lent her a pair of mine.

She forgot she had them on when she went to the public bathhouse.

And never came back.
The missus ran to go see it...

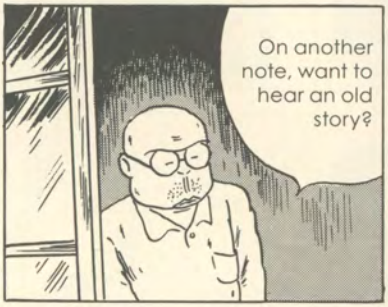
Three days later, there was a fire on the Tsurukawa Highway.

I asked her parents and relatives. I spent a whole week running around looking for her.
下駄

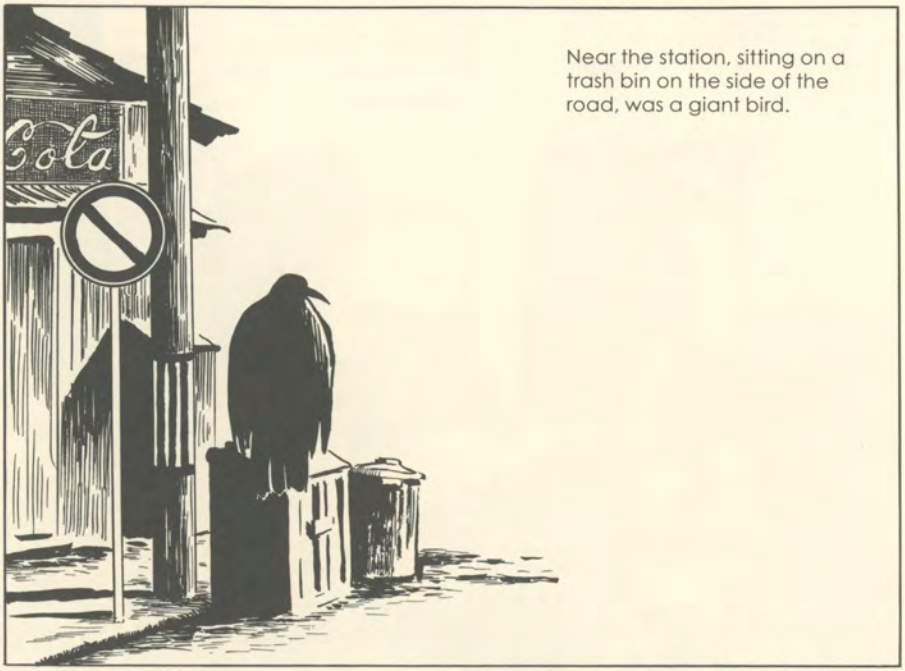
Part-time at both since each track only had races 6 times a month. With 12 days a month, she only made 80,000 yen.
She had been working part-time at both the velodrome here in Chofu and the one in Tachikawa.
Then I went to the track here the other day and, whaddya know, there she was!
What was I saying? Oh yes...
I went to both tracks, and both said she hadn't been in... This is what she told them to tell me, you see.
I have no idea who this man is. No idea.
I was so angry I socked her on the spot, then security jumped me.

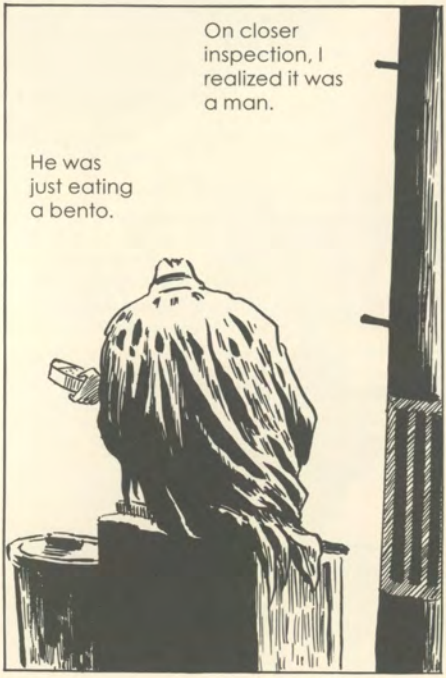
Even between a man and wife, if the victim doesn't forgive the assailant, it's still a crime, that's what they said.
For a domestic dispute?
Arrested for assault, I had to eat prison slop for a week.
The police mistook me for some thug, and dragged me out.
Like that matters! The pot calling the kettle black—that's what marriage is all about.
Isn't the real issue your wife's character?
What's the world coming to?
What wife is going to love a husband who won't even buy her a pair of drawers?
Just blame it on your underwear!
Who cares about character?
You better be careful.
Trash... Worthless worm... To a woman, that's all a man without a job is.

CHEEP
CHEEP


On another note, want to hear an old story?

I was on my way home from fishing for small fry to feed to my birds.
This goes back 20 years.


Cola
Near the station, sitting on a trash bin on the side of the road, was a giant bird.


On closer inspection, I realized it was a man.
He was just eating a bento.

たばこ
I mean big like a giant eagle.
I was scared out of my wits.

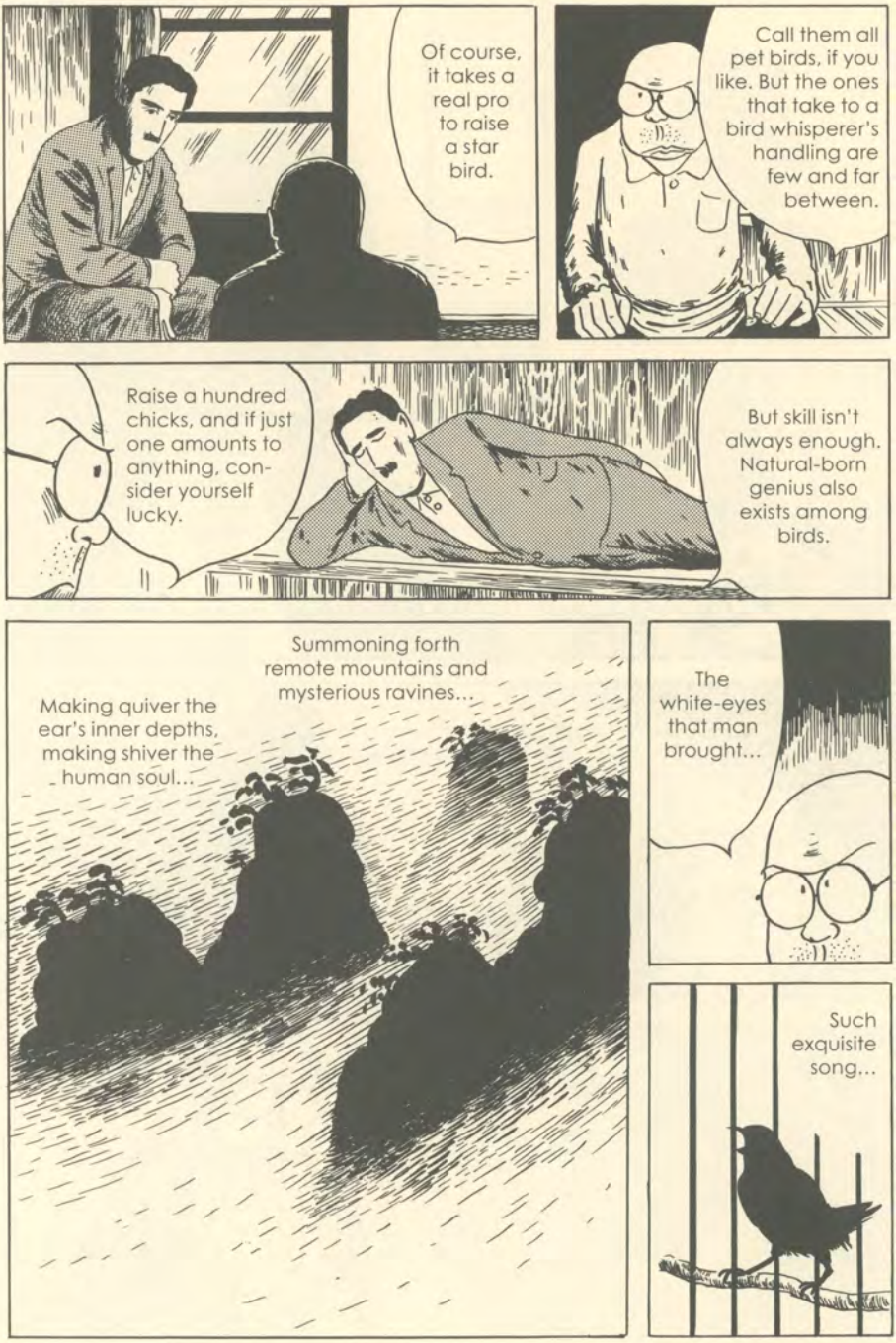
I assumed he was homeless, though he was eating out of a proper bento box.

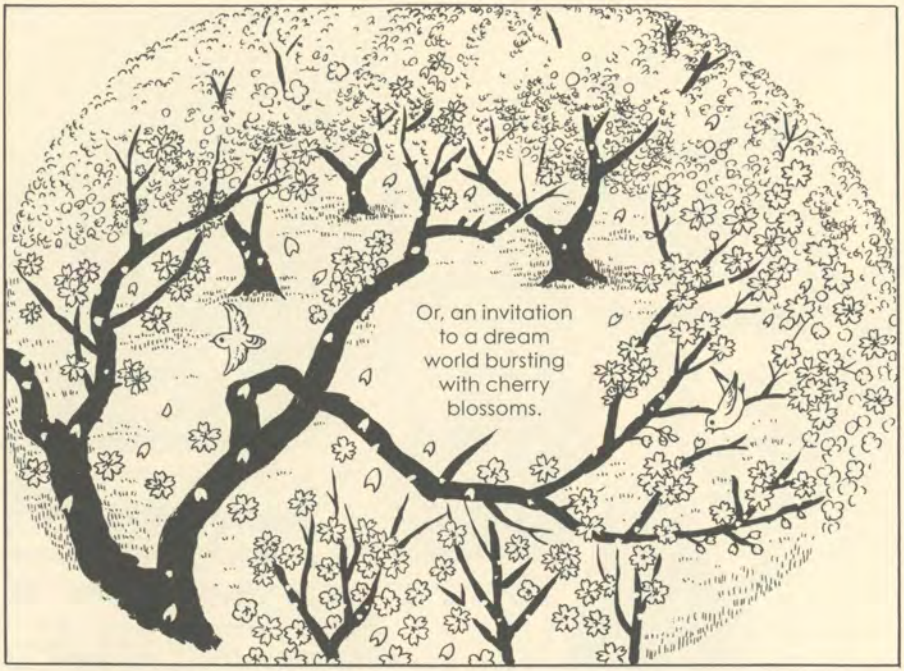
But damn if he didn't look just like a bird picking at its prey.

With a park and a spacious riverbank nearby, why had he chosen to perch like a bird in a place like that?

I spotted him loitering in the area two or three times after that, each time looking vaguely avian.

He'd come to sell birds.
Then, one day, he suddenly showed up at my store.
It turns out the chap was a bird catcher.
Not from a cage, but perched naturally upon his arm.
I slipped him a princely sum on the spot.
He had the most magnificent white-eyes.

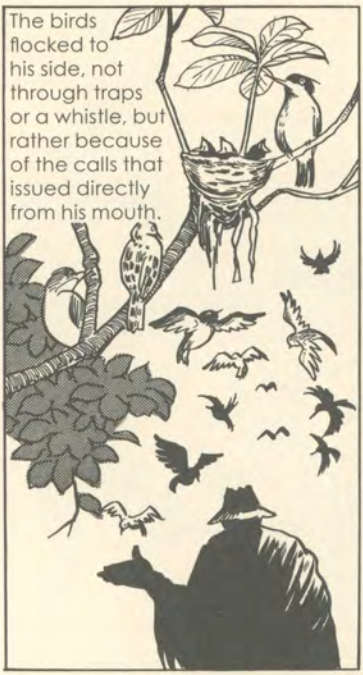

Of course, it takes a real pro to raise a star bird.
Call them all pet birds, if you like. But the ones that take to a bird whisperer's handling are few and far between.
Raise a hundred chicks, and if just one amounts to anything, consider yourself lucky.
But skill isn't always enough. Natural-born genius also exists among birds.
Summoning forth remote mountains and mysterious ravines...
Making quiver the ear's inner depths, making shiver the human soul...
The white-eyes that man brought...
Such exquisite song...

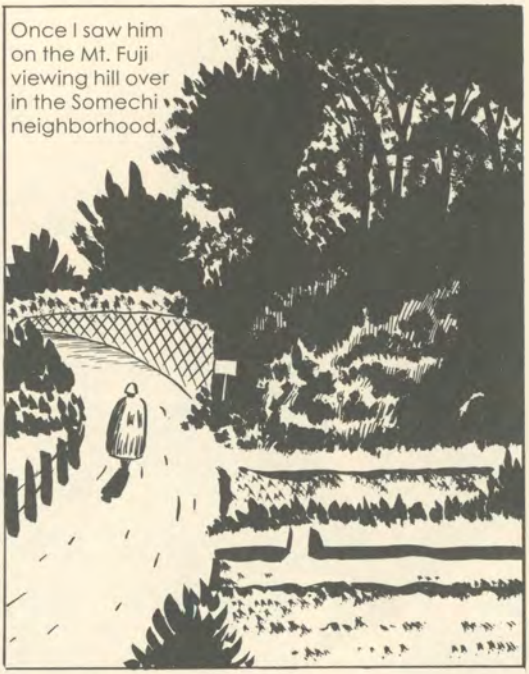

Or, an invitation to a dream world bursting with cherry blossoms.

His ability to catch birds was simply amazing.

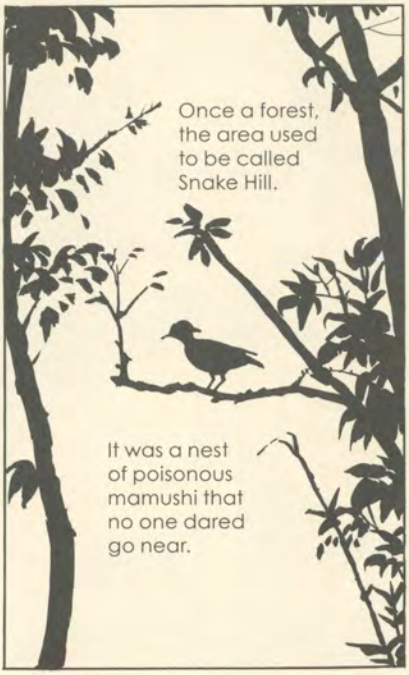
Later he brought bush warblers and skylarks to sell.

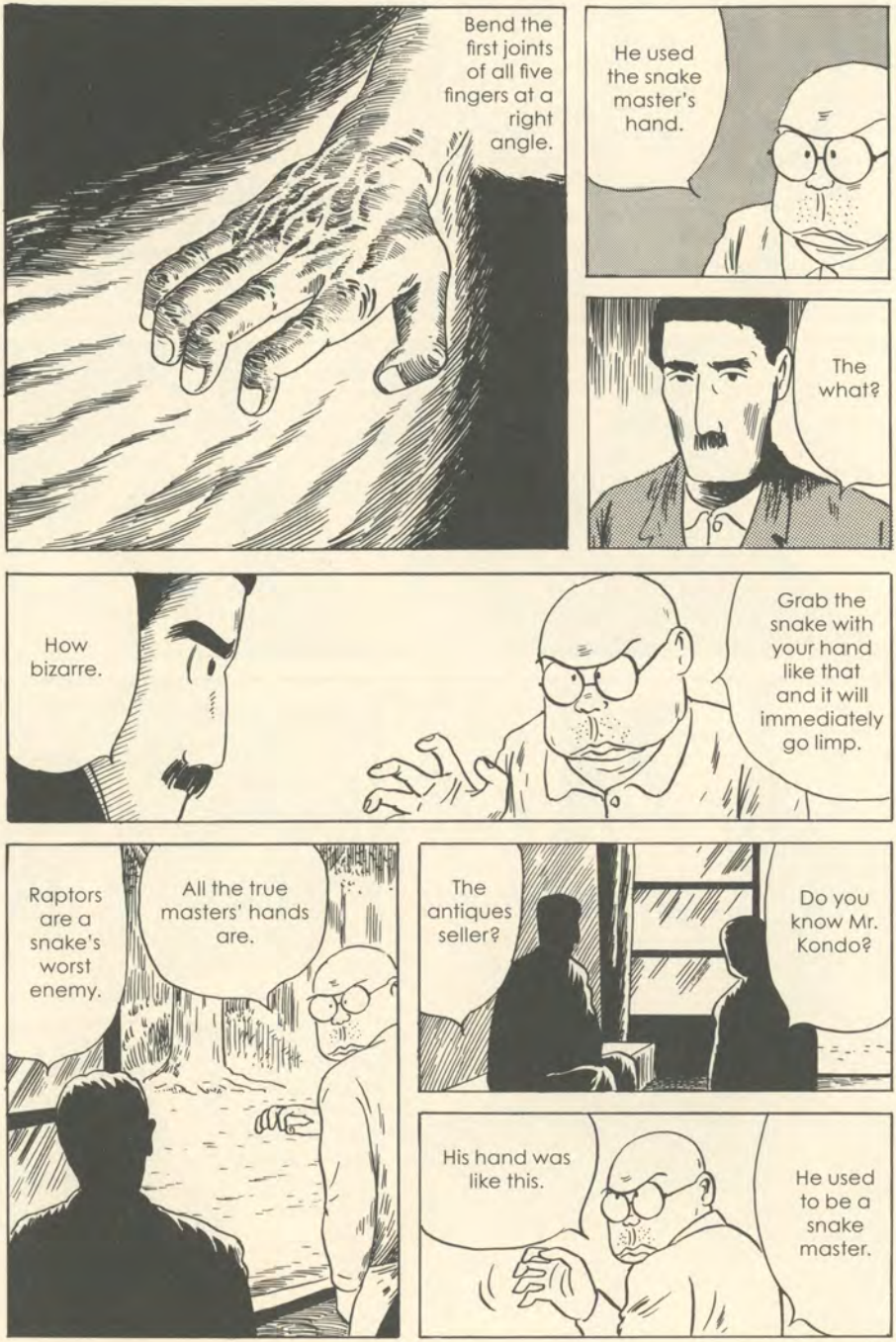
Back in those days, this area was still rural, and teemed with birds.

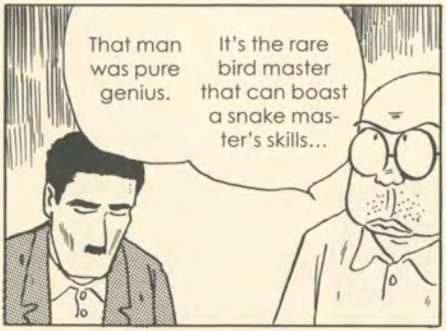

The birds flocked to his side, not through traps or a whistle, but rather because of the calls that issued directly from his mouth.

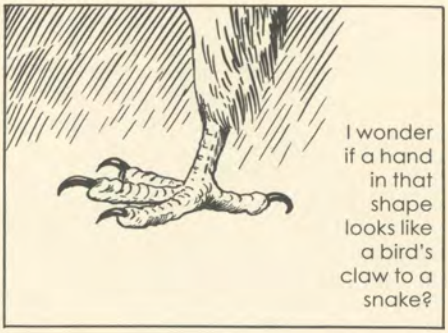

Once I saw him on the Mt. Fuji viewing hill over in the Somechi neighborhood.

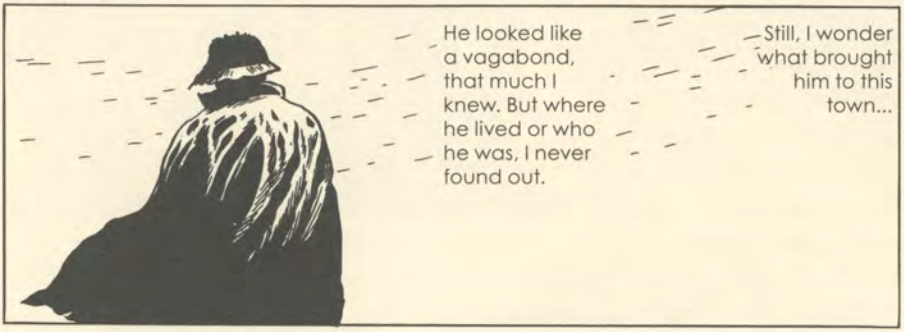
But the bird master simply waltzed in and chased away all the snakes.

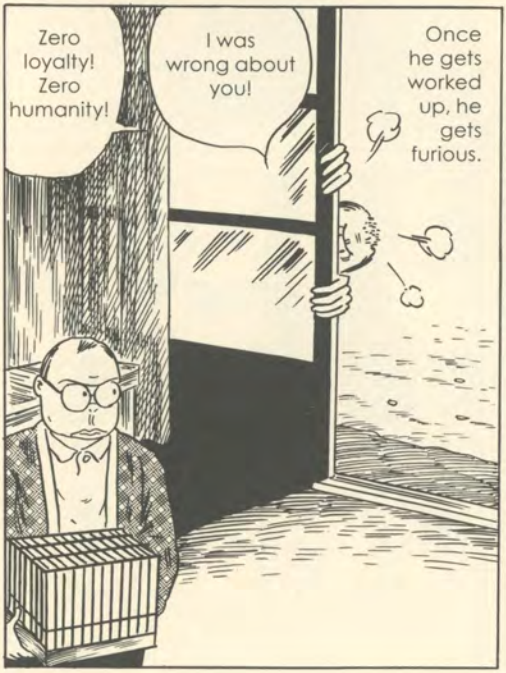

Once a forest, the area used to be called Snake Hill.
It was a nest of poisonous mamushi that no one dared go near.

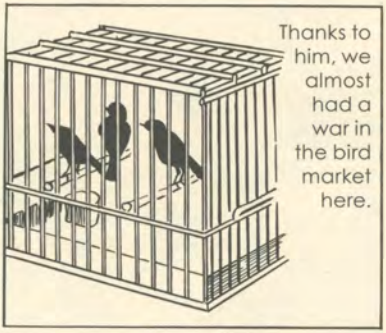

Bend the first joints of all five fingers at a right angle.
He used the snake master's hand.
The what?
How bizarre.
Grab the snake with your hand like that and it will immediately go limp.
Raptors are a snake's worst enemy.
All the true masters' hands are.
The antiques seller?
Do you know Mr. Kondo?
His hand was like this.
He used to be a snake master.

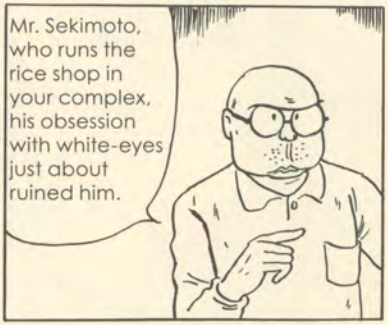

That man was pure genius.
It's the rare bird master that can boast a snake master's skills...


I wonder if a hand in that shape looks like a bird's claw to a snake?


He looked like a vagabond, that much I knew. But where he lived or who he was, I never found out.
Still, I wonder what brought him to this town...

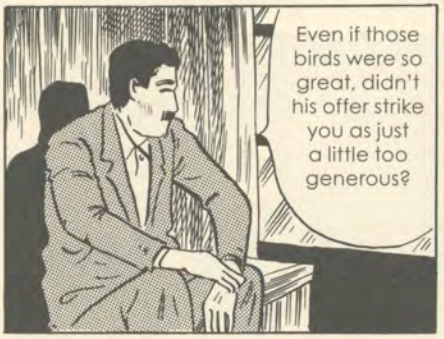

Zero loyalty! Zero humanity!
I was wrong about you!
Once he gets worked up, he gets furious.


Thanks to him, we almost had a war in the bird market here.


Mr. Sekimoto, who runs the rice shop in your complex, his obsession with white-eyes just about ruined him.

Now here I am trying to talk to you like a calm and reasonable man...
And I've never told a soul about the protected breeds you sell!
I've never even bought food from another store!
You've tricked me into buying 50 crappy birds, and still I shop here!
It's 70,000
Who said anything about 50,000?
So what's this about one stinkin' white-eye for 50,000 yen? Who do you think you are buddy?!
Pfft. Does he think I owe him the world for a few piddly purchases?
I'm really mad now!
Oh boy, that does it!
No can do. If I sell them all to you, I won't hear the end of it from old man Hatanaka.
Just promise you'll sell them all to me.
Here, here's 60,000.

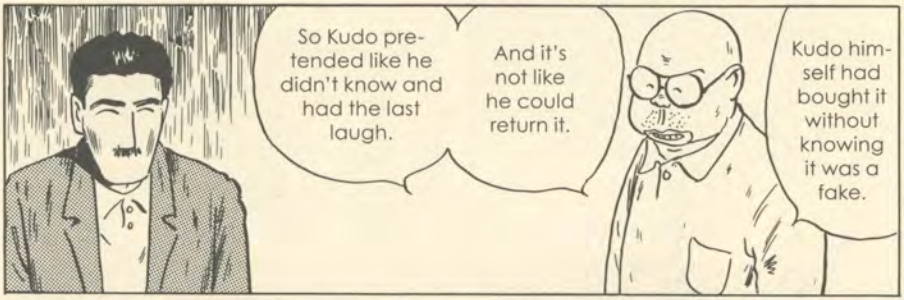
He said he'd pay 80,000.
GRRR
CRUNCH CRUNCH
What right does he have keeping birds?
That pervert with four kids?
We actually owe him quite a bit for rice.
He didn't get out of debt from that until his son opened up a shop in your complex.
No way!
He left bite marks.
That stingy bastard figured it was cheaper to catch birds himself than buy them at a shop.
Then there was the abbot of P Temple, the butcherous priest who installed mist nets around his temple's perimeter.
Yet still he pinches pennies.
They say he's practically minting money from selling temple land.

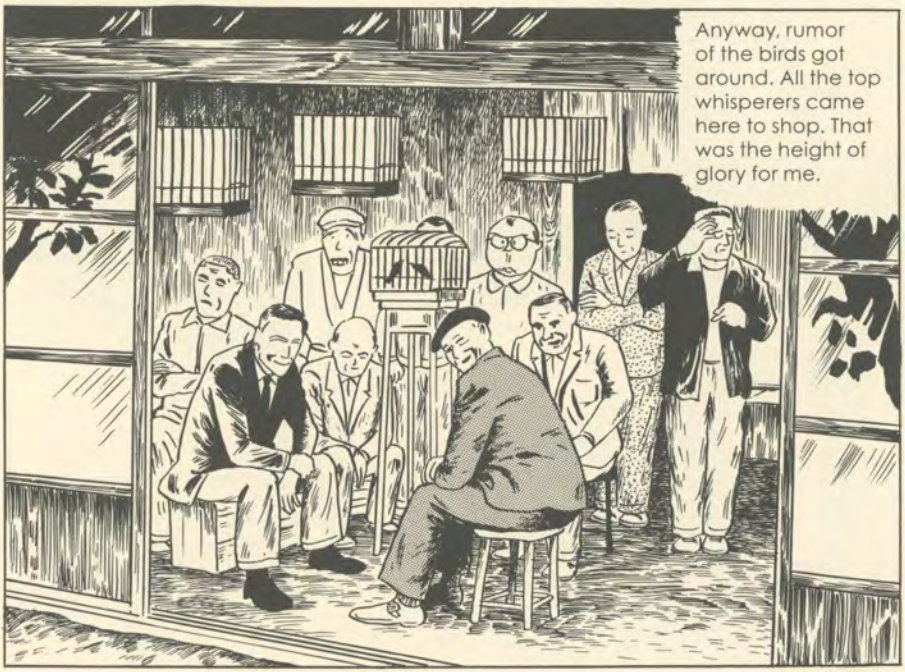


book: Historical Ranking of Celebrated Birds

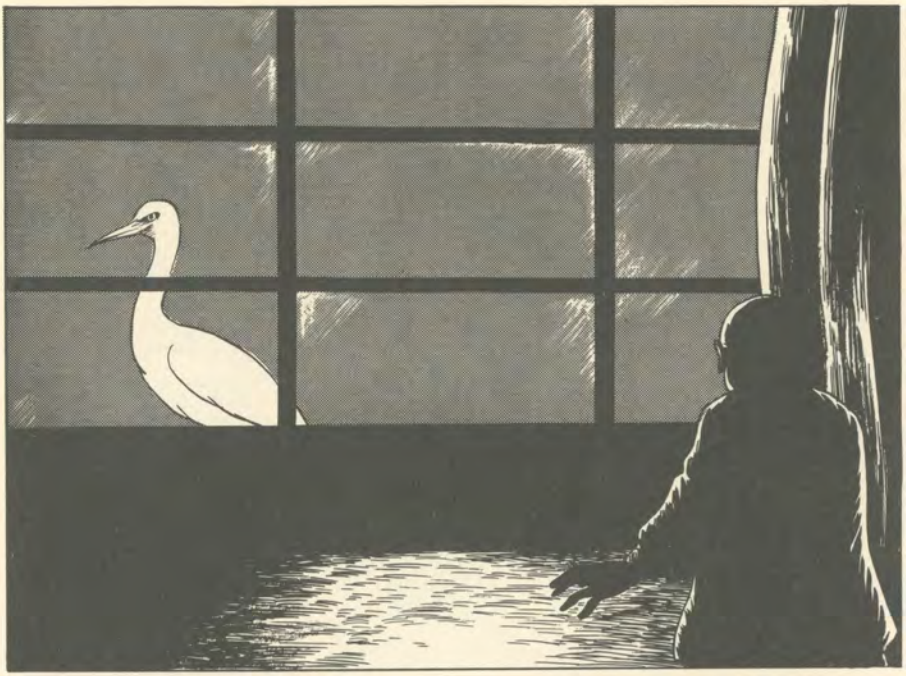
The abbot had been duped into buying it from Snake-seller Kudo.
As for the chest, it turned out to be a total fake.

Unbelievable.
The trainer bought a nice house from that bird.


So Kudo pretended like he didn't know and had the last laugh.
And it's not like he could return it.
Kudo himself had bought it without knowing it was a fake.

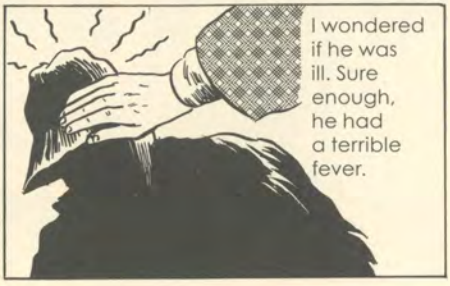

Anyway, rumor of the birds got around. All the top whisperers came here to shop. That was the height of glory for me.

You mean, they had no more time for trivial pursuits?
What happened to those men?
Like you said earlier, times have changed...
Eccentrics and geniuses like the bird master also disappeared.
Then, three months later, on a day of non-stop rain...
Respect individualism, they say, then throw crooked nails in the trash.

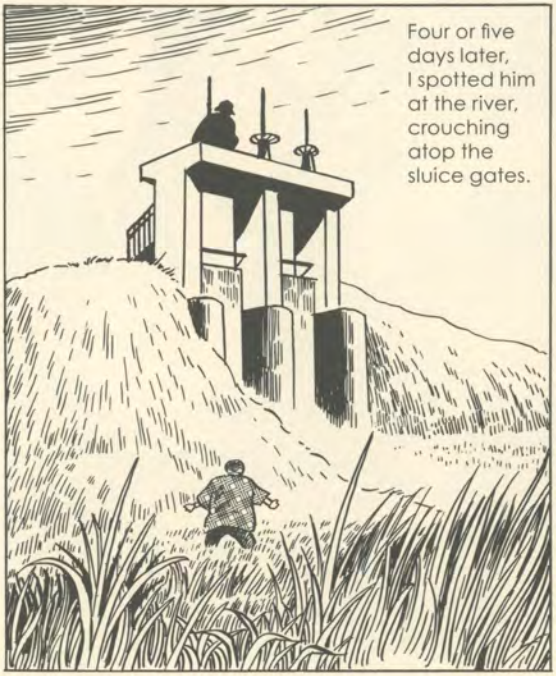


The bird master appeared in a horribly weakened state.

I insisted he come inside, but he refused to heed anything I said.


I wondered if he was ill. Sure enough, he had a terrible fever.

He had come to sell a white egret, but I don't deal in large birds. Forgetting my debts to him, I turned the bird master away.


Four or five days later, I spotted him at the river, crouching atop the sluice gates.

He's going to fly!
Seeing him like that, I thought...
He looked, as with the first time I saw him, just like a bird.
I burst out screaming...
YES FLY
FLY FLY
FLY
Oh yes! Yes he did! Oh yes he certainly flew.
Well did he?!
My chest burned. Tears gushed from my eyes.

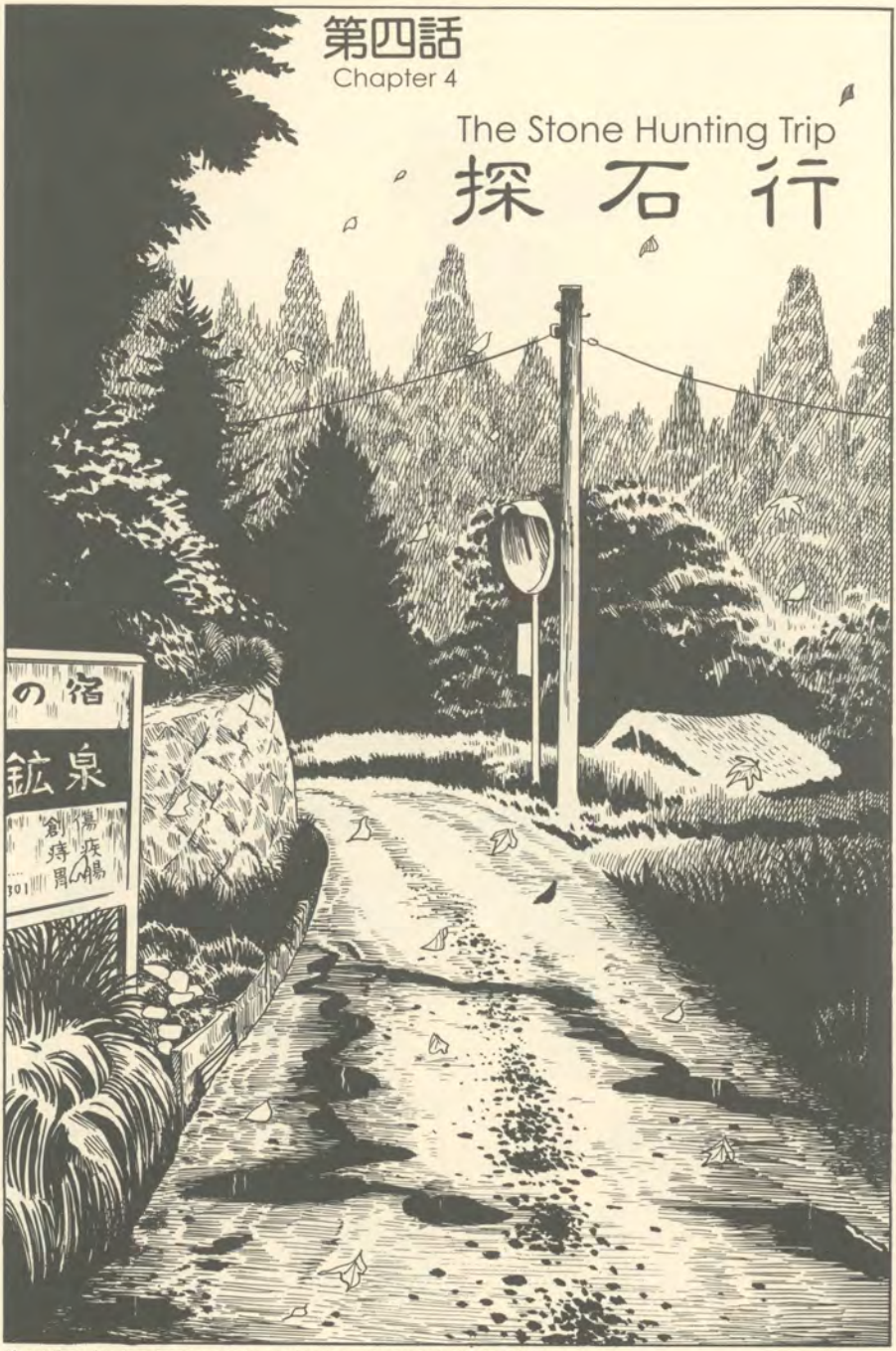
Please take me with you!

Pfft. Why didn't you go with him?
I imagine that he was not very healthy.
What happened was he fell from the gates and croaked in the grass.
Thanks to him, you had to go back and forth to the police station for three days straight. They couldn't figure out who he was. What stupid nonsense.
Yeah, you got greedy, and ever since then you've been in the dumps about how this business turned out.
Don't say that. Thanks to him, I made quite a bit of money.

HOO HOO
Who cares! What good is any of what you men do anyway?
Oh it's so deep and profound...
Well now, look at how late it's gotten.

HHA!

Daddy
It's time to come home.



Sign: Mineral Spring, for wounds, hemorrhoids, and gastrointestinal problems

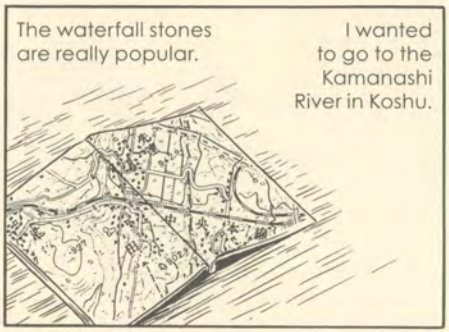
sign: Yamai's Vintage Books

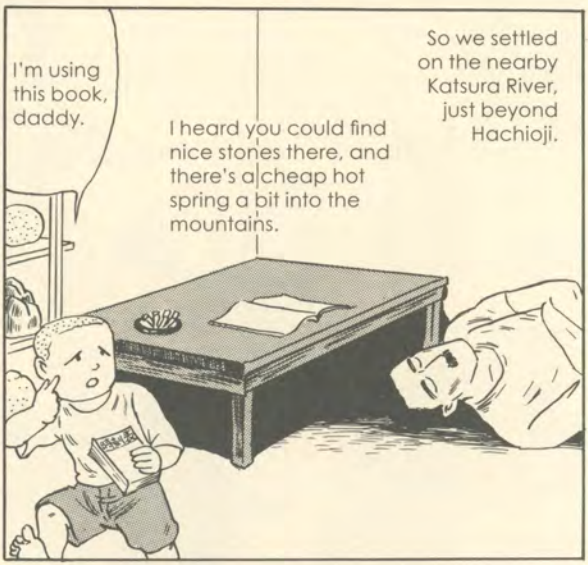
book: Red Mask Demon

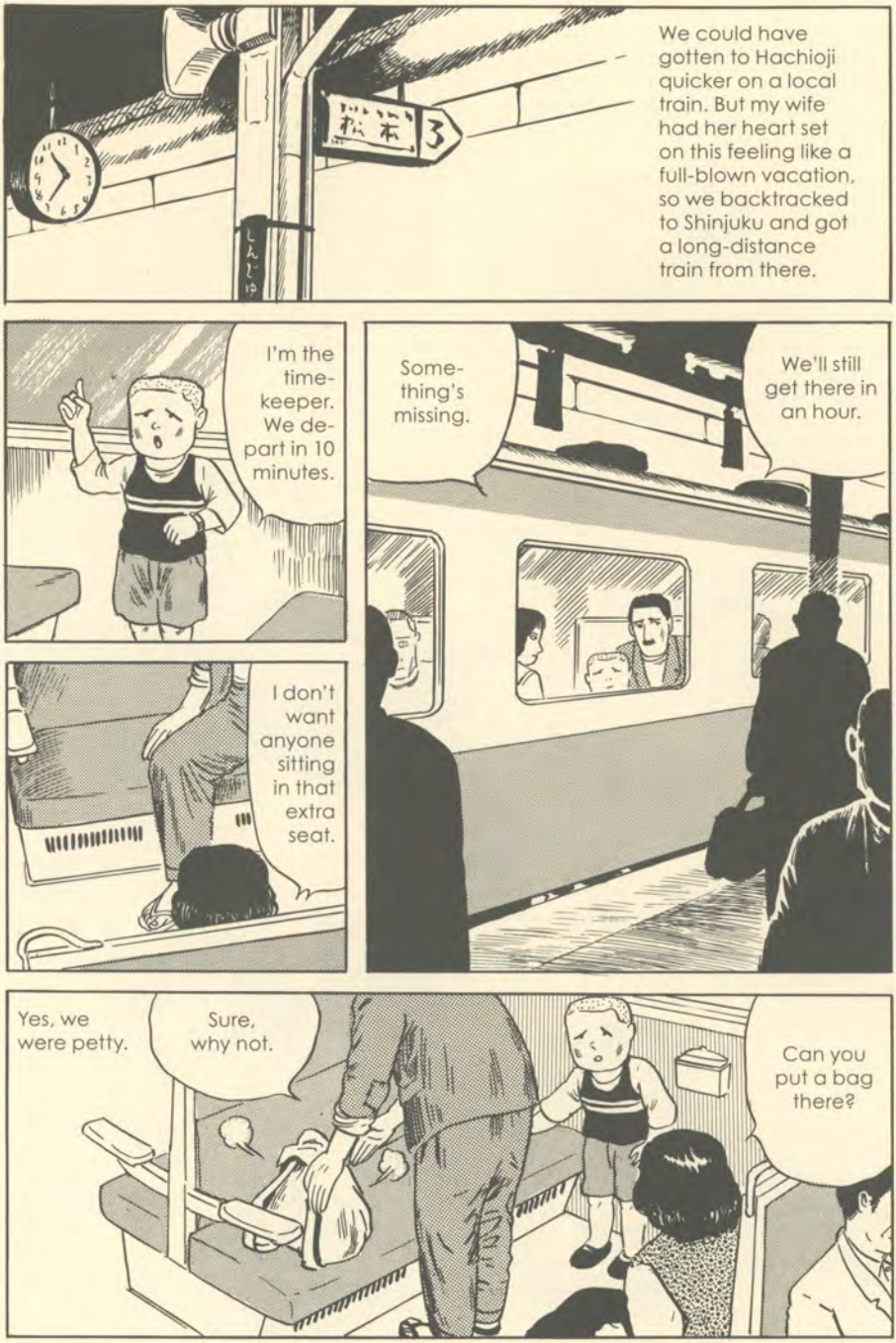
You should be thankful to have such devoted fans.
What a weirdo.
He wants to trade you this book for original artwork.
I know a dealer who'll take it for 50,000.
Leave it to me.
Yeah, but I don't want my old books.
Out of which, 30,000 for you.
Whatever. I made 30,000.
Was that really what that book was worth?
I accepted the offer. Was that really what my drawings are worth?

Business was slow because my stock lacked variety.
But since it just fell in my lap, it didn't feel real, so I invested it in my business instead.
I knew that we needed the money for our daily bread.
The stones from around here are too plain.
I'll get customers if I have unique stones, and for that I need to travel.
Yay! Let's go!
I could use a break.
We can combine it with a family hiking trip.

book: train schedule






We could have gotten to Hachioji quicker on a local train. But my wife had her heart set on this feeling like a full-blown vacation, so we backtracked to Shinjuku and got a long-distance train from there.
I'm the time-keeper. We depart in 10 minutes.
I don't want anyone sitting in that extra seat.
Some-thing's missing.
We'll still get there in an hour.
Yes, we were petty.
Sure, why not.
Can you put a bag there?

It's fine, I'll be right back.
The train leaves in 7 minutes!
Go buy some.
It doesn't feel like a real trip without a boxed bento.
Okay Okay
No, daddy, it'll leave without you!!
Waaa waaa
Daad-dyy daaad-dy

Departing in ooone minute.
Fine, we'll buy them in Hachioji.
Boo hoo hoo
What are you crying about?
Be quiet. Stop worrying about everything.
What station are we getting off at?
Daddy, sit properly.
Sansuke had never traveled before, and it was stressing him out.
Remember to get the bags down one station early.
Was he a responsible boy? Or just a worrywart?
As if our family's fate depended on him.
He sat alone fidgeting...

At Hachioji station, there were no boxed bentos to be bought.
We got here in no time.
I'm hungry.
There's nothing near the station. This place is like the middle of nowhere.
Let's find some lunch.

Hee hee
La la la
But what a relief to get away from daily life.
No proper restaurants or cafes?
Thank god. A soba shop.
Three plain soba please.

Mama
Mama, poo poo
PLUNK
Oh this child.
SPLISH
SPLISH

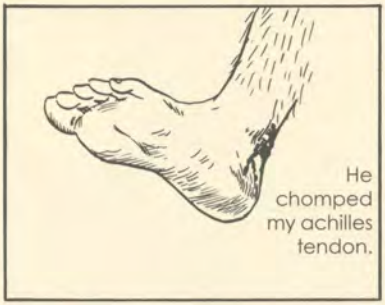
What kind of hand-washing was that?

We make the noodles by hand. You won't be disappointed.

I kicked at a stuffed dog on the floor...
Upon exiting the household toilet...

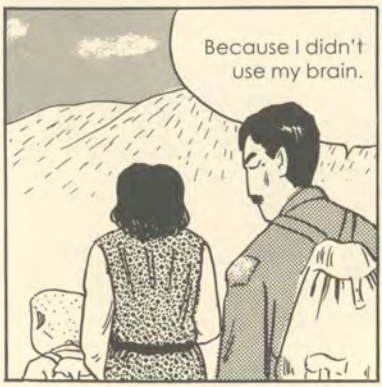
Now I have to shit, too.

Excuse me, where's your restroom?
My god.


He chomped my achilles tendon.

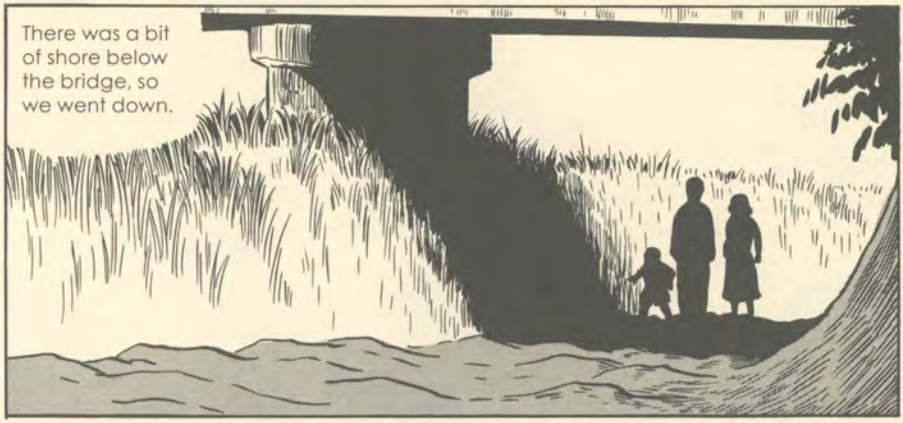
The lady treated me with iodine.

Why did you have to kick it?
I hope that dog doesn't have rabies.


Because I didn't use my brain.

It turned out to be the real thing.

We'll have to go up or downstream to find stones.
The river's banks were cliffs.


There was a bit of shore below the bridge, so we went down.

It's all mud and no stones.

Now what?
I guess we have to walk through.
We can't go around.
Rock paper scissors...
We don't all three need to get wet. Somebody should carry the other two across.
Good idea.

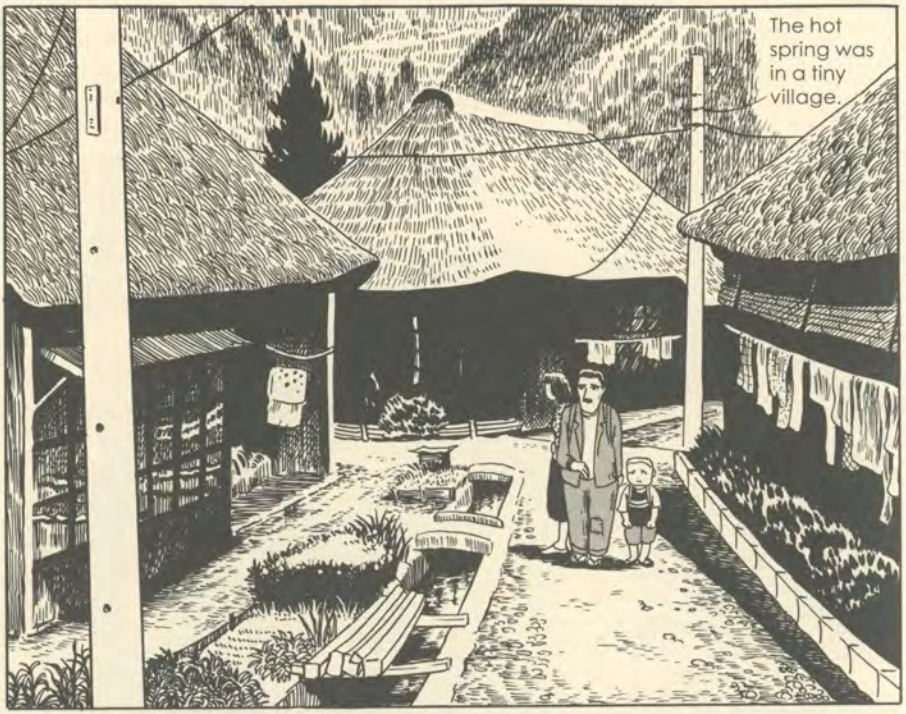
You are something else!
How's a child going to carry us?!
Shoot!
The stones were piled in the middle of the river.
And we saw no other place to look for stones.
The current was too fast to cross.

CHEEP CHEEP
Use your brain...?
Do you, like, ever...

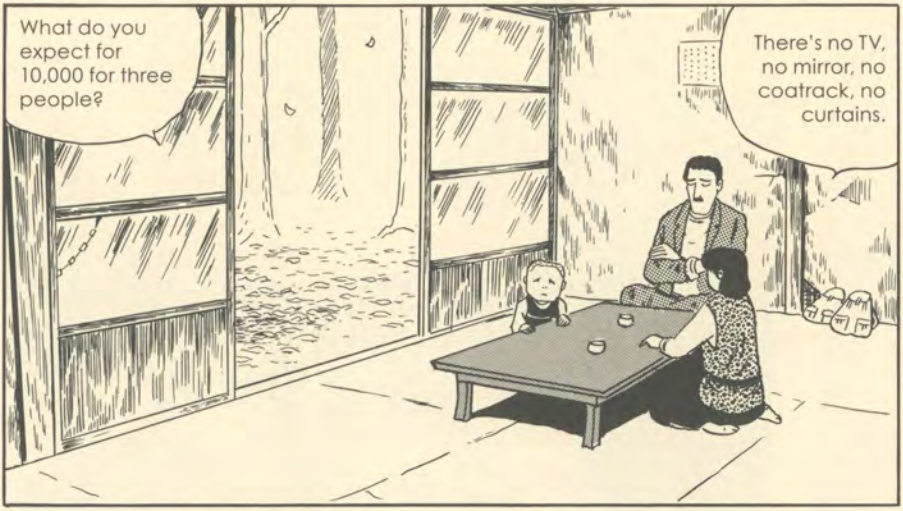
It's not like things are going to get any better.
Not a bad idea.
Feels like this is when families commit suicide.
Just loneliness and old age...
My foot is throbbing from that dog.
It's 30 minutes to the hot spring.
If there's no stones, there's no reason to stay.
Let's go home.
No way! I came here to relax and that's what I'm going to do!

Why am I such a loser?...
It hurts.
But I never suspected that my own wife's—
I've heard of bad luck pussy...
Don't you dare blame me.
Ever since we got married—
Every-one?!
Go to hell! Everyone says my pussy is the best!
I'm talking about a long time ago...

WOOF
WOOF
GRRR
I guess he did have rabies.
HOWOOOL
Just like life.
This road really has its ups and downs.


The hot spring was in a tiny village.

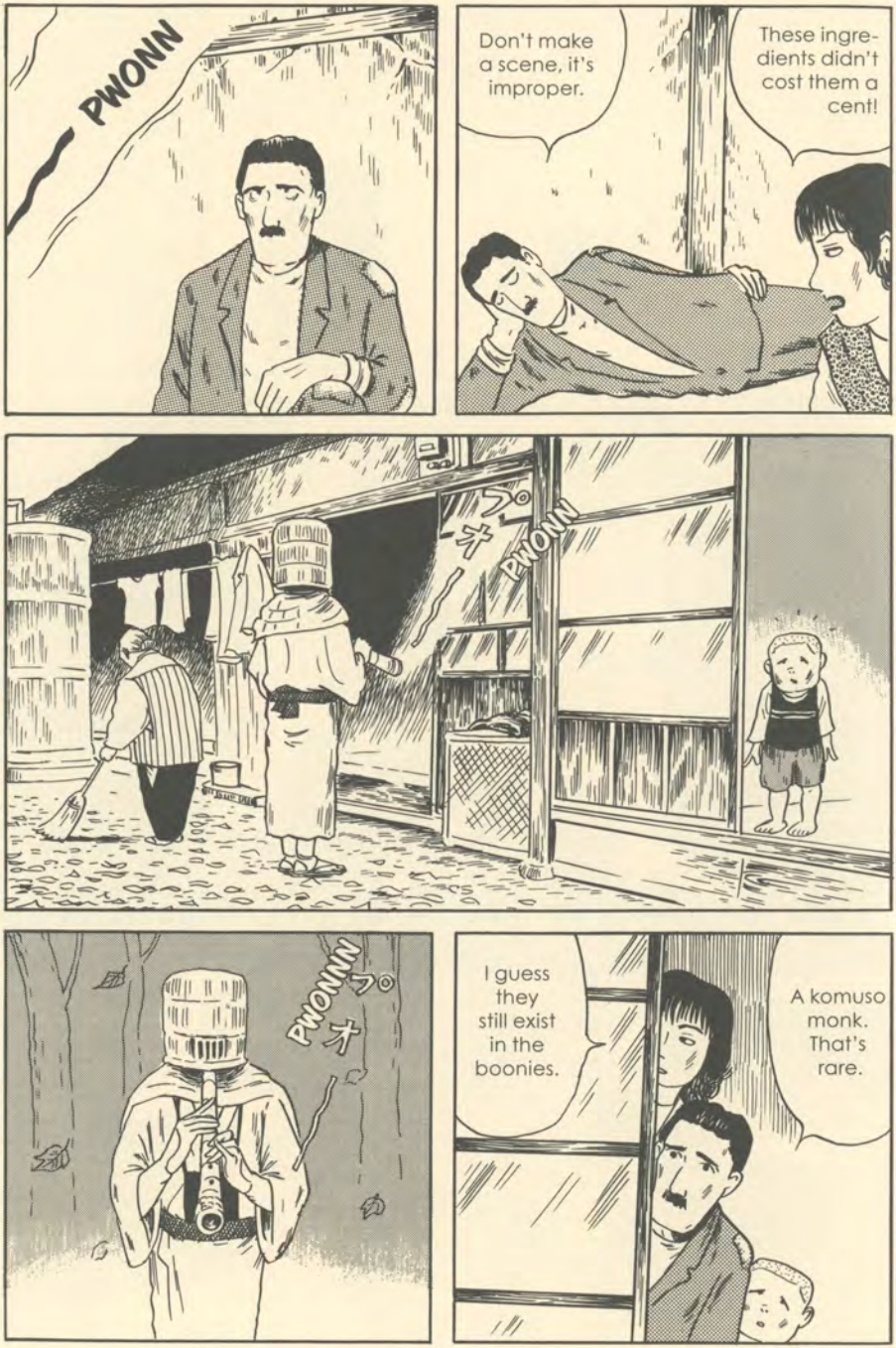
It was a barebones place run by an elderly couple.


What do you expect for 10,000 for three people?
There's no TV, no mirror, no coatrack, no curtains.

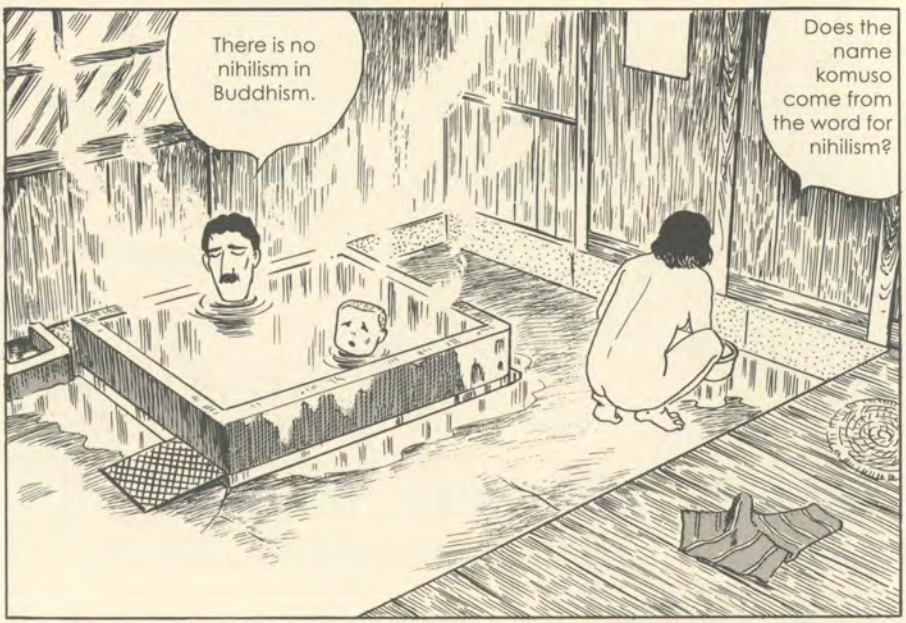
How are we supposed to relax with their laundry hanging right here?

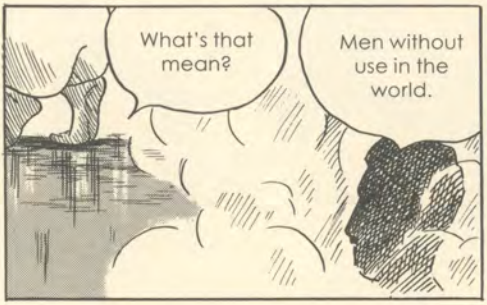
Eggplant pickles, eggplant miso soup, stewed eggplant...
My wife calculated the costs of our impoverished meal.

Eating so early, we were bound to be hungry again before bed.
Dinner was served prematurely at 5 pm.


PWONN
Don't make a scene, it's improper.
These ingredients didn't cost them a cent!
PWONN
PWONNN
I guess they still exist in the boonies.
A komuso monk. That's rare.

box: "Lightness and darkness," each residing in the other


There is no nihilism in Buddhism.
Does the name komuso come from the word for nihilism?


What's that mean?
Men without use in the world.

I'm not sure of their history, but think of them as mendi-cants.

Ha ha, something like that
You mean worthless and helpless?
Men free of purpose within today's advanced capitalist society.
Sounds like you!
Laundry
What are you doing?
Can we please forget our daily lives for once?
Shouldn't let all of this hot water go to waste.

We might as well have been at home.
We had to lay out our own futons.
There's no way we're becoming komuso!!
I wonder if komuso make decent money?
What are you thinking about?

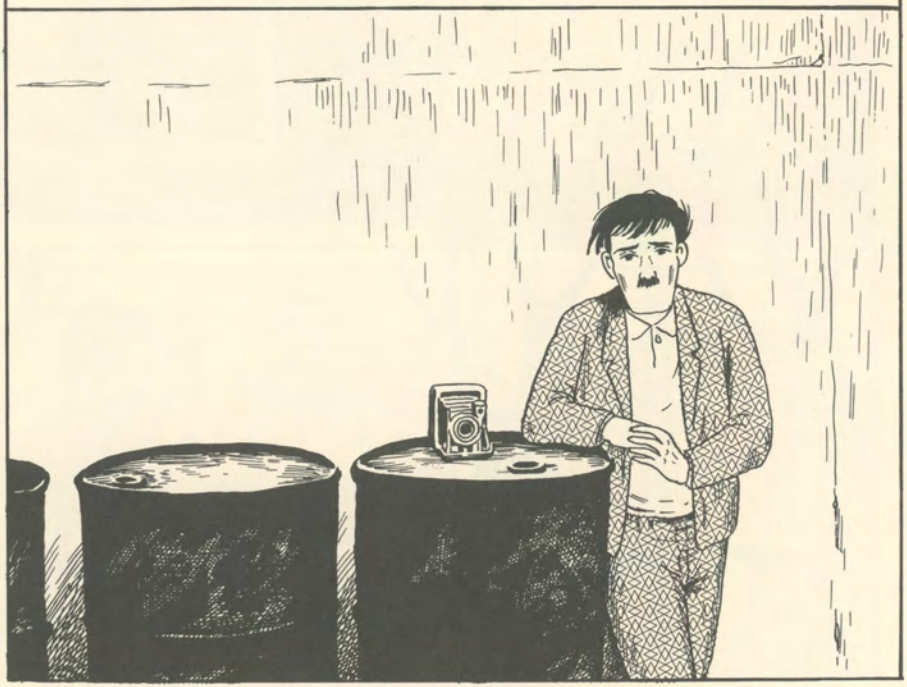
Even this late...
Hear that? He's out there somewhere.
PYONNN
Sure sounds lonely.
Damn, now I'm feeling melancholy.
It's almost like it's just the three of us, alone, in this vast universe.
We might as well be isolated from the rest of the world.
What's going to happen to us?
We don't have any close friends. We aren't close with our families.

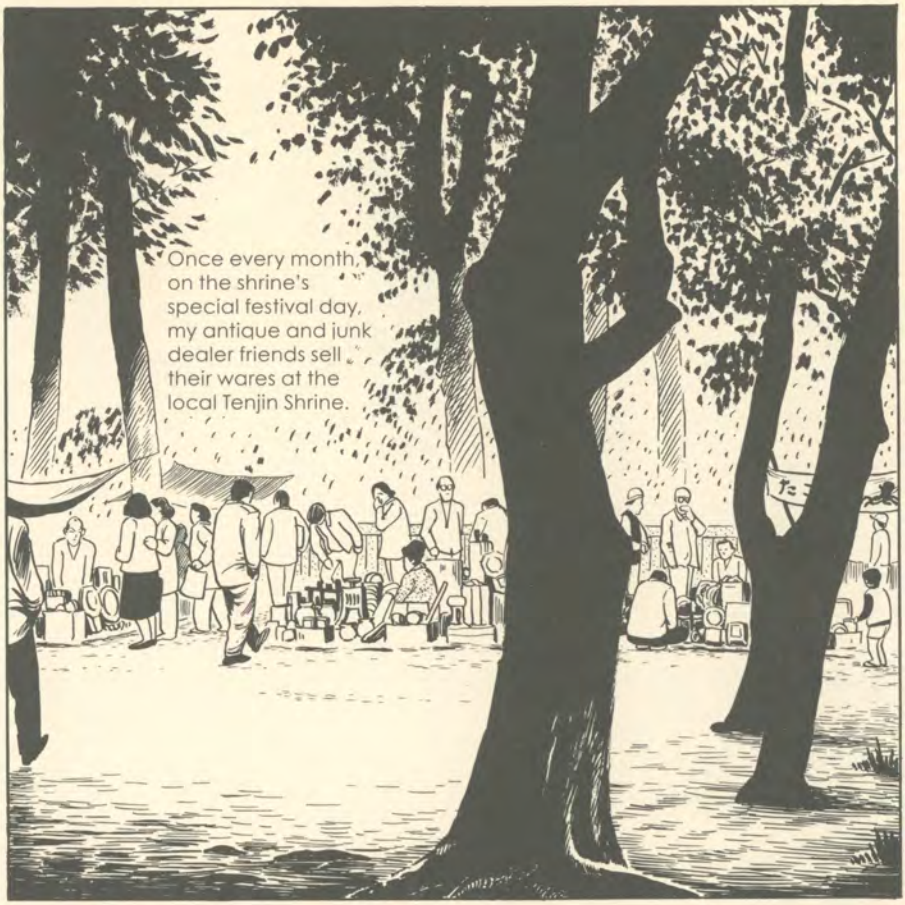
Just the three of us, that sounds fine to me ...
プォ
PYONNN

第五話 Chapter 5

カメラを売る

Selling Cameras

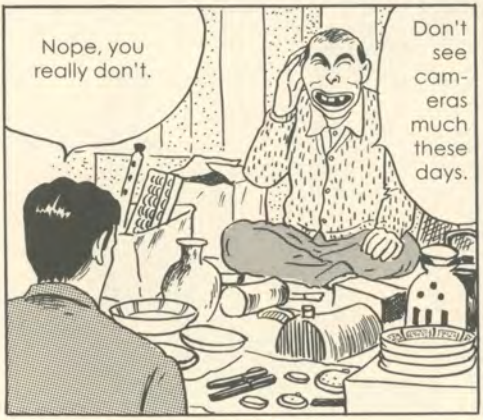




sign: Cotton candy 100 yen

They are all bottom-crust businessmen. Their air of poverty soothes the soul.

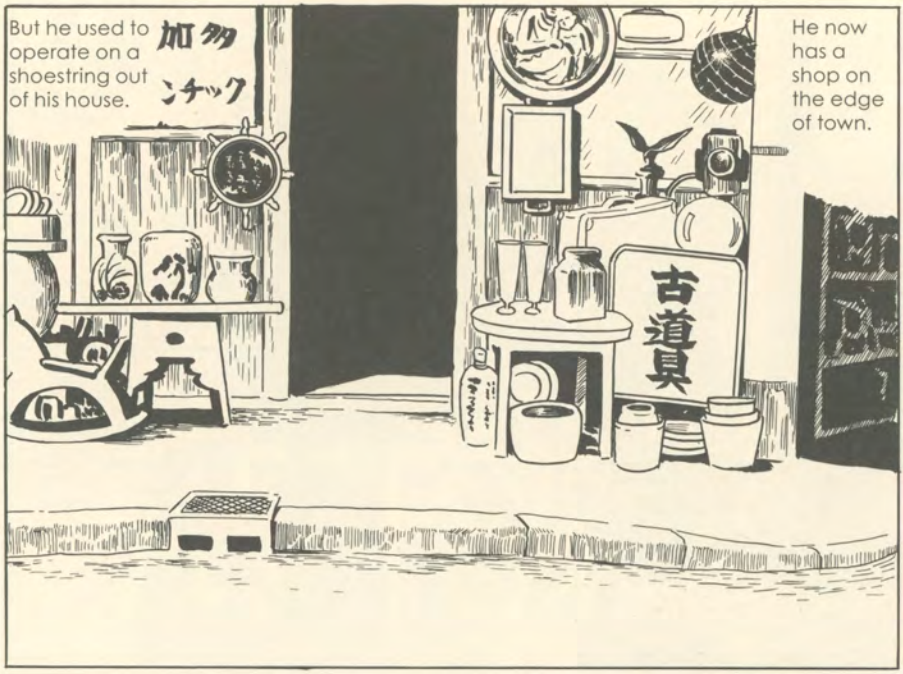
Long time no see.


Nope, you really don't.
Don't see cameras much these days.

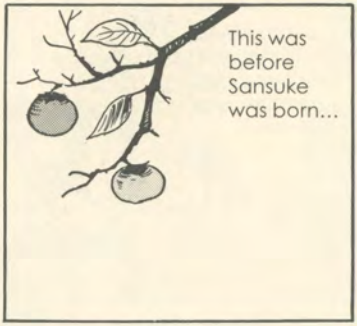
Not bad.
Hey, how's the stone biz?

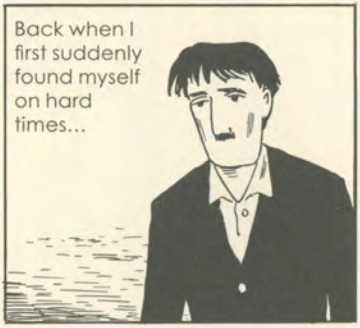
Good people, one and all.
It's not just cameras. You can't find anything good these days.
BOP
Crooks are a dime a dozen in the antiques business. But the sellers at the bottom are harmless fellows.
Wipe it off!
I don't have one.
I wanna handkerchief! Gimme a handkerchief!
Waaa

Buy me a new one!
Dammit! How did so much shit get stuck in it? What am I supposed to do?
Buy me a new one!
You can't wipe off cotton candy, it's sticky!
WAA WAA
Okay, let me take a look.
Come here. Uncle Nakata will give you some octopus dumplings.
Hey Sansuke. What's wrong buddy?
I owe a lot to him.
Mr. Nakata was my teacher.


But he used to operate on a shoestring out of his house.
He now has a shop on the edge of town.
古道具

Like a stray dog digging through the trash.
Wandering around town...


This was before Sansuke was born...


Back when I first suddenly found myself on hard times...

Having always been interested in antiques, I knocked on the door.
That's when I discovered Mr. Nakata's place, way down a back alley that I'd never passed through before.
アンティック
奈加多
sign: Nakata Antiques
I'm more of a trash collector.
Well, I'm afraid you've come to the wrong place.
Oh, nothing really. I just like antiques...
What'cha looking for?
Anyway, come on in.

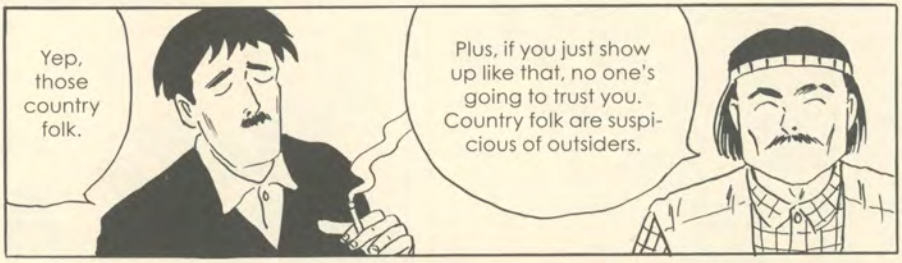
There wasn't a thing I wanted, which was disappointing...
He was right. It was all junk.

However, it was a pleasure to observe Mr. Nakata content buried beneath his trash.

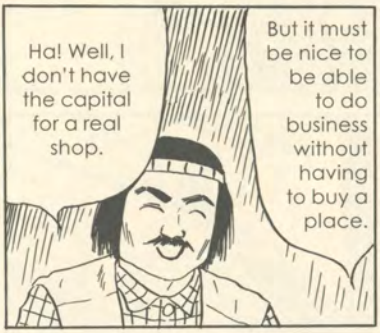
And it didn't seem so bad.
I tried to imagine myself in Mr. Nakata's place...

Thank you.
Coffee?
Nestled in a pile of junk sounded about right to me.
How long have you been here?
I didn't think there were any antique shops in town.
Five please.
How many sugars?
Still, it's a trickle.
I have a space at the Tenjin flea market. I hand out business cards there.
How do customers know you exist if you don't have a shop?
Only a year.
I don't doubt that, but what kind would be both cheap and effective?
Advertising. That's what you need!

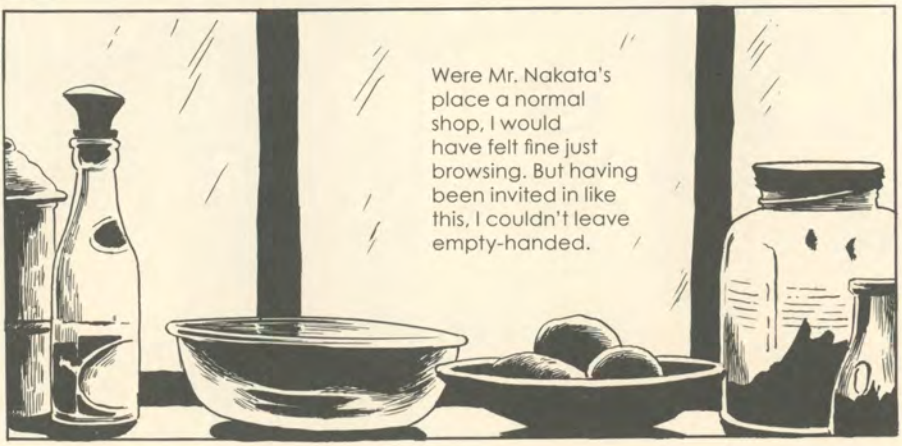
How do you build inventory?
Bath houses!
How about posters in public bath houses?
Buying things directly from the public is definitely the best, but that's hard without a proper store.
Mainly through the trade market, but people also approach me at the flea market.
I don't do that. It's far, and if I don't find anything, I have to eat the travel costs.
Hmm, I see...
How about trying the countryside? I'm sure there are treasures buried in old houses.


Yep, those country folk.
Plus, if you just show up like that, no one's going to trust you. Country folk are suspicious of outsiders.

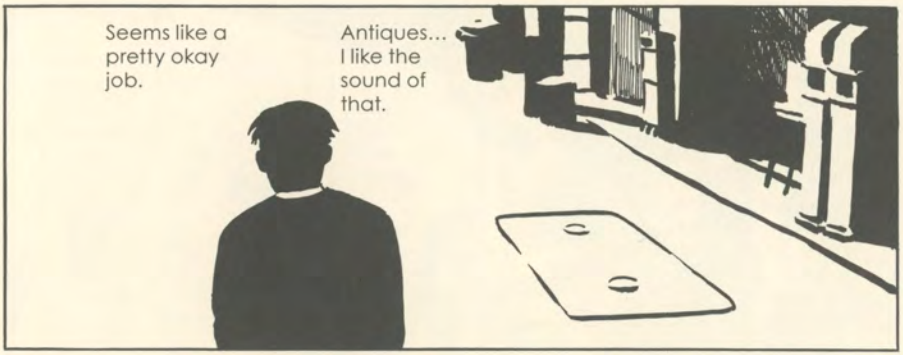
Yes.
Are you renting this house?


Ha! Well, I don't have the capital for a real shop.
But it must be nice to be able to do business without having to buy a place.

It's not easy.
There are dealers based out there anyway.

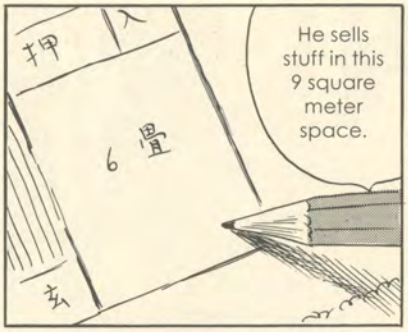

Were Mr. Nakata's place a normal shop, I would have felt fine just browsing. But having been invited in like this, I couldn't leave empty-handed.

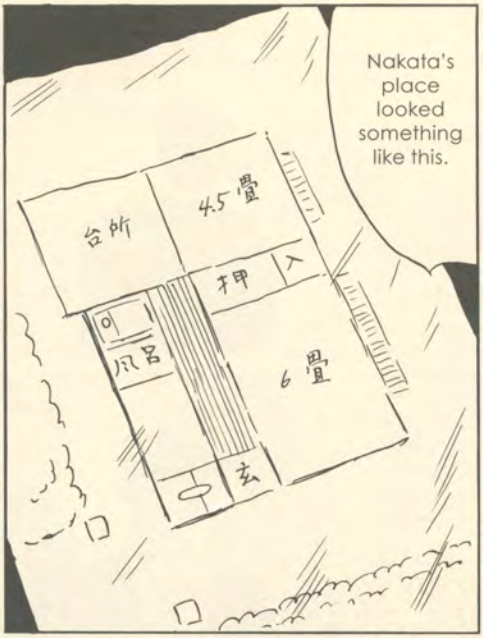
left sign: Old books *middle sign: Yamai's Vintage Books* *top sign: Shop*


Seems like a pretty okay job.
Antiques... I like the sound of that.

It's not like I could keep drawing comics forever, anyway.
I became obsessed with the idea.

It'd probably be wise to make a clean break here and now.


He sells stuff in this 9 square meter space.
押
入
6 畳
玄


Nakata's place looked something like this.
台所
4.5 畳
押
入
風呂
6 畳
玄

Two rooms and a kitchen are all I need.

We'll have to rent a house.
But since it can't be on the second floor...

And a home business would allow me to do what I wanted with my time.

A proper shop would require two different rents.

Or take a nap.
When I wasn't busy, I could draw comics.
Hee hee, oh boy oh boy oh boy!
What are you laughing about?
Oh how I would love to be buried beneath antiques...

And slowly become an antique myself...
A life spent buried on the edge of town.

?
So find a place for us, will you?

You better not quit comics!

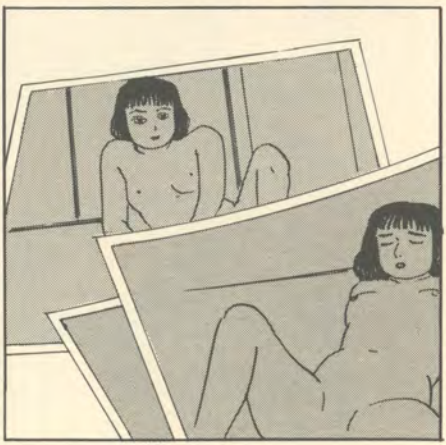
I'm going to be an antiques dealer.

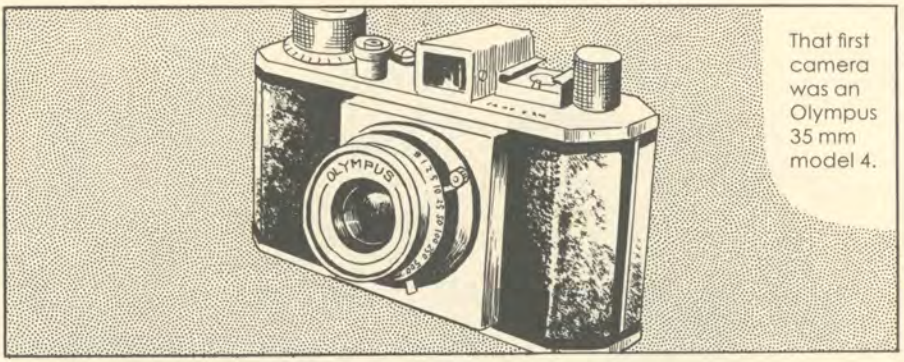
Don't be nervous.
Okay, let's try it out.

As there was no harm in busting a 1,000 yen camera, I futzed around and found that fixing it was far easier than I had expected.

Oh my god. Like this?

My wife was still cute back then.




That first camera was an Olympus 35 mm model 4.
OLYMPUS

One day, we were in Shinjuku and happened to pass by a used camera store, where I saw the same model selling for 14,000 yen.
カメラ
タムロン
コムラー ズーム
ライカ スクリュー レンズ各種
下取 歓迎
富

Th-that c-c-amera is worth a f-f-fortune!

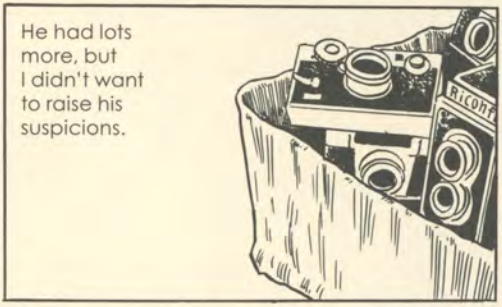
Holy shit! I made 13,000!
豊富

And this 30,000 one! He had that one too!
Oh my god! I saw that one at Nakata's too!
20000
What's wrong?
堂カメラ
Ohhhh Ohhhh
Fragile, aren't you?
I need a minute...
メラ
If you can get the broken working, you're in the money.
I raced back to Nakata's.

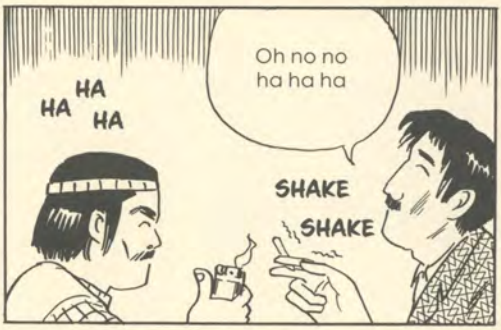
Ha ha ha
Oh yes, ha ha ha

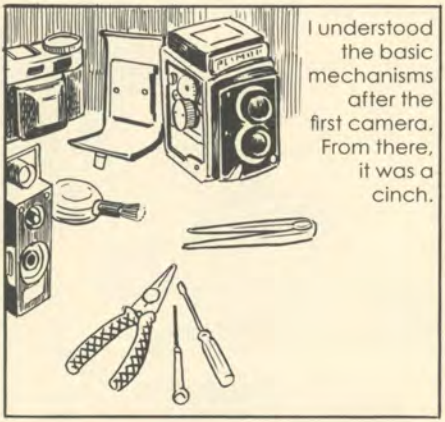
What a thrill, bull-shitting my way through his stock.

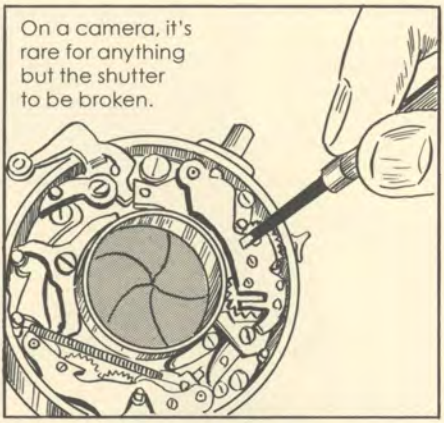
Oh no, I'm not building a collection. I'm taking them apart for fun. Ha ha ha.


He had lots more, but I didn't want to raise his suspicions.
RICOH

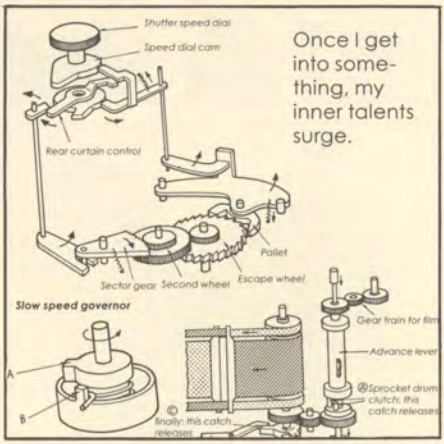
I bought four. Once repaired, we're talking 50,000 yen.


Oh no no ha ha ha
HA HA HA
SHAKE SHAKE

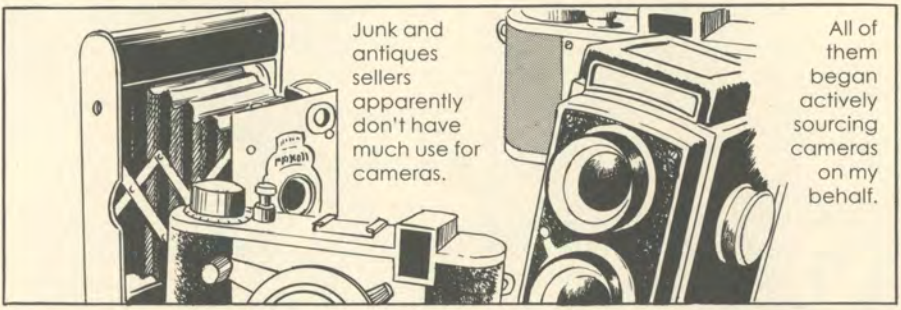




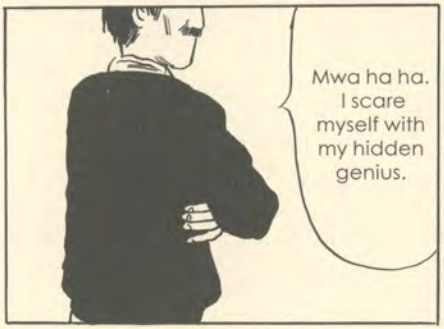
books: History of Cameras, Classic Cameras

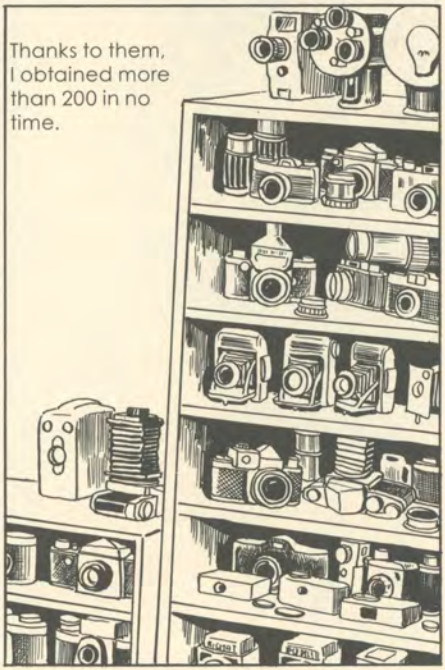


Mr. Fukada, Mr. Suzumoto, and Mr. Kudo, who used to run a snake shop.
I learned of other junk sellers...


Junk and antiques sellers apparently don't have much use for cameras.
All of them began actively sourcing cameras on my behalf.

400,000 invested for an inventory worth 2 million.


Mwa ha ha. I scare myself with my hidden genius.


Thanks to them, I obtained more than 200 in no time.

Happy to hear it, but it's not like they make money just sitting on the shelf.
Forget antiques. I'm going into the camera business.
How are you planning on selling them?
Our savings are almost gone and now there's the baby.
You think I'm just playing around?!
Hobby?
If you don't give this hobby a rest and start drawing comics...

I am intimately familiar with how miserable being broke is. I am taking this very seriously.
Never a day passes that I don't think about money.
Maybe you should stop waiting for the phone to ring and go see if anyone is interested.
My ink has sprouted mold.
It's been over a year since anyone has asked me to draw anything.
Then even less work will come.
I'm no rookie. If a veteran goes and tries to sell themselves like that, it'll just look like I'm washed up and desperate.
You don't understand how the comics industry works.
Art Comics. That label itself is the problem.
I'm sure some publisher will help you out.
But the critics love everything you draw. They always say it's art.

I am finished with comics.
Cameras are my only option.
The comics industry has no use for art.
You terrify me. You're your own worst enemy. You drag yourself down.
BANG

I tried out the classified ads in the back of one magazine.

ターズ マーケット

売ります FOR SALE 買います WANTE

★

ベビーミノルタ……¥25,000
サモカ35 I……¥12,500
ロード35 4B黒……¥15,500
キャノンデミC標準、望遠レンズ付……¥17,000
珍品……¥23,000
……¥35,000

And then, vintage cameras became the hottest thing.

カメラコレクション情報 創刊号

title: Camera Collection Info, No. 1

前略
CC丁誌 1
掲載をみました
中心に収集しておりますが、最近
ロレフにも興味を持ってお
し、掲載誌が、お手元に有りまし
お譲りいただきたく思います。
希望誌
1. サモカI型
2. キャノンデミC
以上をお譲りいただきたく思
連絡下さい。又
連絡は、お

I saw your listing, and was interested to know if you also had... 私は

I advertised 5 or 6 cameras, and much to my surprise got 40 offers in the mail.

Heh Heh Heh Heh

謹啓
ベビーミノルタ売却の
拝見しました。
I saw your ad for the Baby Minolta...
譲りたい
ます。私
を全にコレクトして居りま
モルタ合資のミリアス
ミルタへ

As someone who lives in Hokkaido...

前略
小生、戦後のスプリングカ
ますが、北海道の片田舎で
ん。貴殿の売り
セミオート(中)
ズホ6単独距付
まして、若し、まだ
あせて

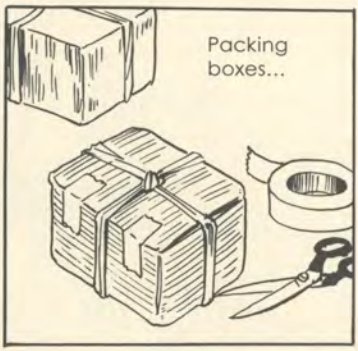
Have you lost your mind?
MWA-HA-HA
HEH-HEH
I was right! I knew it all along!
One!
Who is going to be the lucky buyer? Hee hee hee
Two!
He's in the camera business now.
Can't you see that daddy is working?
Sansuke! Don't do that!

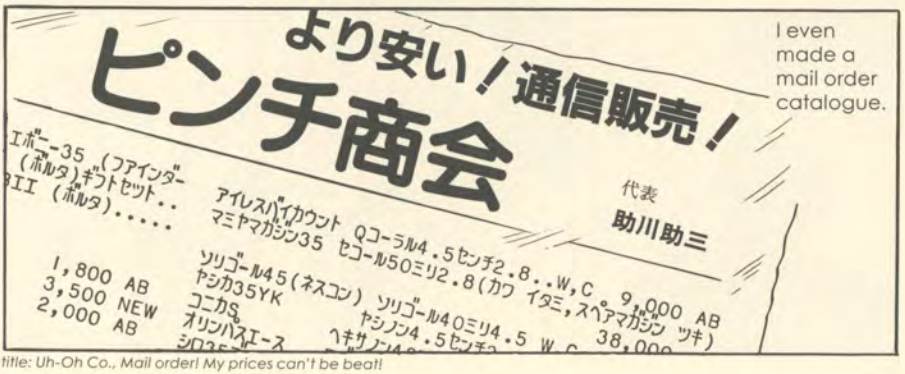
万．同用6×9ロールホルダ
．ⅢM二万八千．ミノルタV2七千．カロ35E
六千．カロワイド七千．オリンパスWE一万．35
SⅡ九千．オートテラⅡB二万七千．ミノルタS
R2二万．SR3二万．アサヒAP二万五千．キ
ャノンVL2二万五千．L2二万．7二万イズレ
モ1.8付．スーパーセミⅡ型三万五千．SSドリ
二万三千．キヨウワシックスRⅢ一万五千．オリ
ンパスシックス最終型一万六千．ウエルミーシャ
クス五千．6×9スプリングカメラウエルタガラ
ント一万七千．アグファビリレコードー万八千．
ベッサスュパ付二万

★ ダック620美品2万円
空軍用珍品レンズ4イチンチf4.5.美品4万円バ
テモート9.5㎜説明書付2万円又は上記品とキャ
ノン7Sと交換も可
〒336 埼玉県浦和市北通2－8 木村 幹男
★ コンタックスⅡA3.5ⅢA2ビオゴン35ゾナー
135各ツアクスファインダ附以上30万ミニコ
ードⅢケース説明書附10万レオタックスGトプ
コール2ラクカメーター附5万コダックポケット
50水中ケース附2万でゆづる。
〒233 横浜市港南区日野町 8－13
松岡 正由

Thus I submitted a listing every month, with fantastic response.

text: Camera models and prices





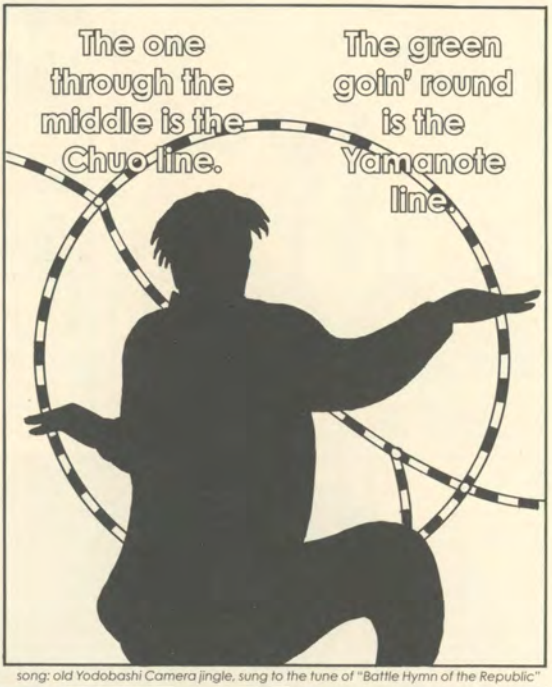
title: Uh-Oh Co., Mail order! My prices can't be beat!

note: lines from Kenji Miyazawa's famous poem, "Ame ni mo makezu"

Hold up the umbrella, dammit!
WAA
WAA
Stop your wailing!
SMAK
WAA
WAA
We're getting soaked!
WAA
WAA

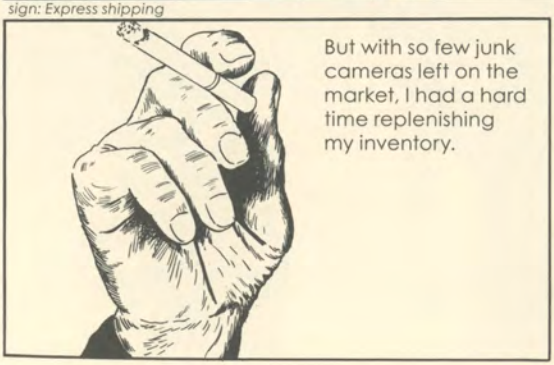
It's Yakuta-san from Custom Comic.
Phone for you.
It could be work.
Never heard of him.
Why did you tell him no?!
What?!
Sorry, but I'm just not up to it right now.
Comics are just comics, they'll never be art!
You and your narcissism. What are you all uppity about?

How dare you think so little of me?
Pouting?
Stop pouting. No one gives a damn.
Hear me now! I have no intention of wasting the rest of my life on such a stingy industry as comics!
30% off! 40% off!
How about 50%!!
Bring it on!
I am a man of much grander—
You you you
I'll be as big as Sakuraya and Yodobashi Camera!



song: old Yodobashi Camera jingle, sung to the tune of "Battle Hymn of the Republic"

sign: Express shipping



Collectors hoarded whatever they could get their hands on.

Without a storefront, it was hard to find sellers among the general public.

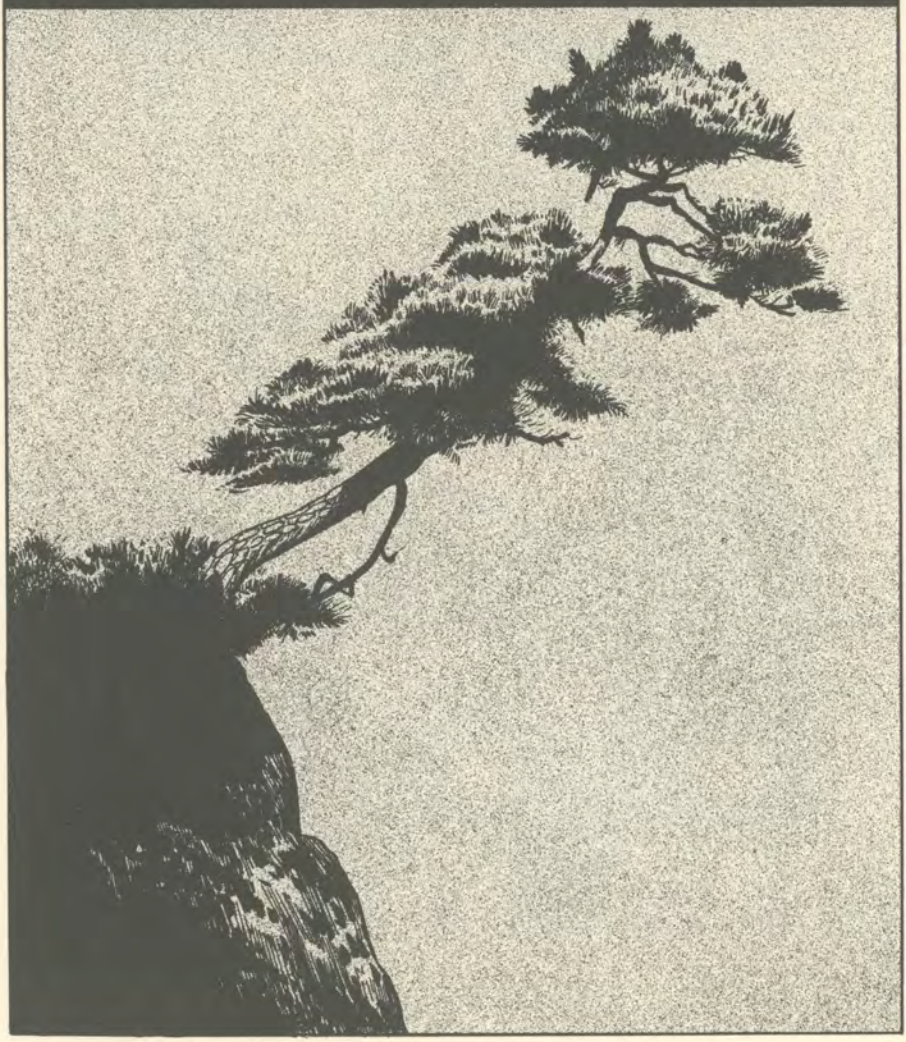
古物商許可証
On Mr. Nakata's advice, I got a proper antique dealer license. But still, nothing...

Soon it was all over...

Fukada-san, thank you for all your help.
Nakata-san, thank you for all your help.
Kudo-san, thank you for all your help.
Suzumoto-san, thank you for all your help.

第六話
Chapter 6

蒸　発
Evaporation



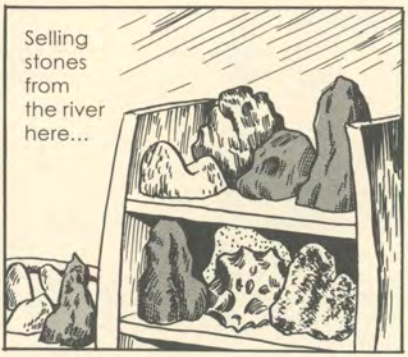
sign: Yamai's Vintage Books

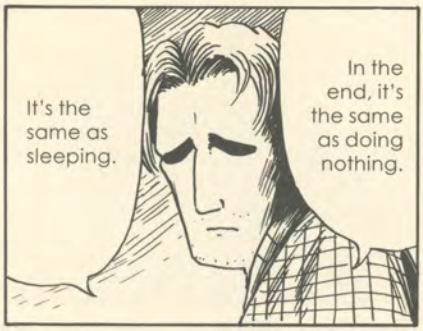
Slow and unsteady, as if he was old or ill...

The other day, I saw him out taking a walk, a rare sight.

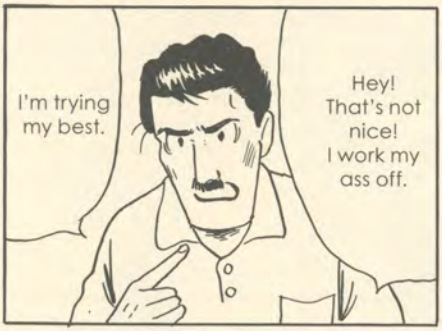
According to his wife, however, he's never once been sick.

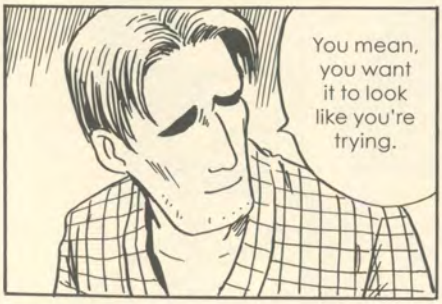
What's the big idea?
Aren't you always lying around?
Why me?
I would expect you to notice.
You can't fool me. We both know that's not a real business.
Oh, well, that's because business is slow.
banner: Stones
sign: Art stone fair

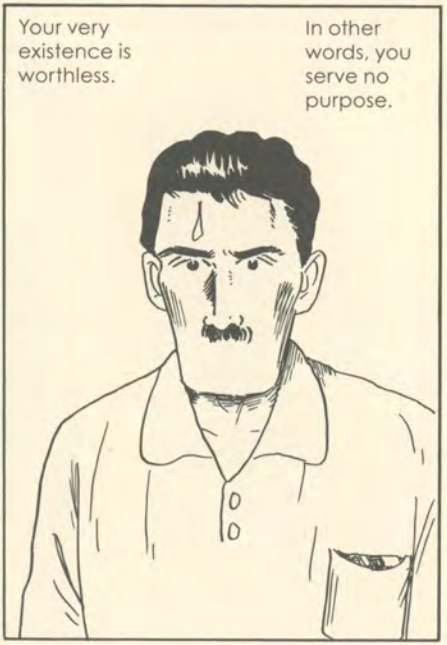

Selling stones from the river here...


It's the same as sleeping.
In the end, it's the same as doing nothing.

You know very well they'll never sell.


I'm trying my best.
Hey! That's not nice! I work my ass off.


You mean, you want it to look like you're trying.


Your very existence is worthless.
In other words, you serve no purpose.

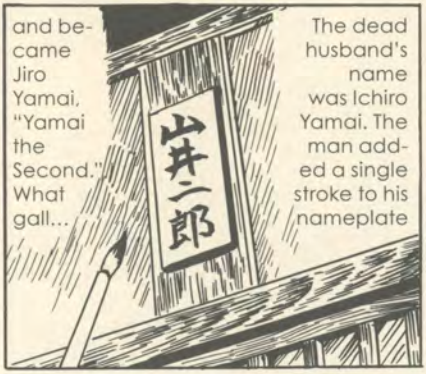
This way people think I'm old and sick.
By acting like a cripple?
But I have my own tricks.
I don't take it to the extremes you do...
No one wants to talk to me.
My wife sees me as some heartbroken fool, washed-up and without a job, a worthless deadbeat.
Be useless, and society will abandon you.
No one expects or depends on me for anything.
Of course they don't.
Oh lordy!
Present yet nowhere... That's me.
Thus abandoned, I practically cease to exist.

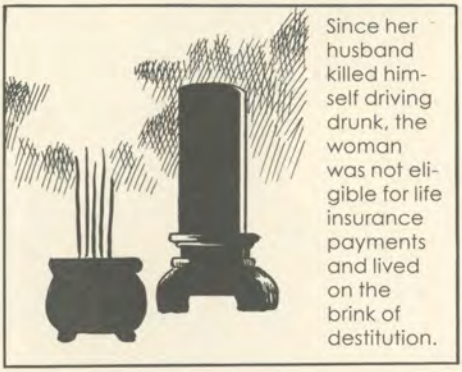
sign: Yamai's Vintage Books

Mind if I have a look?
We sell through catalogues and vintage book fairs.
One was listed in the phonebook, but there was no shop at the address.
My husband passed away and I don't know anything about books.
How can you quit with such a large inventory?
Sorry you came all this way, but we're closed for business.
A few dealers offered to buy them, but the price they cited was so low...
I have no idea...
What are you going to do with them?

After a few visits to pick through her stock, he and the bookseller's widow became an item.

How would you feel if I took them off your hands?


and became Jiro Yamai, "Yamai the Second." What gall...
山井二郎
The dead husband's name was Ichiro Yamai. The man added a single stroke to his nameplate

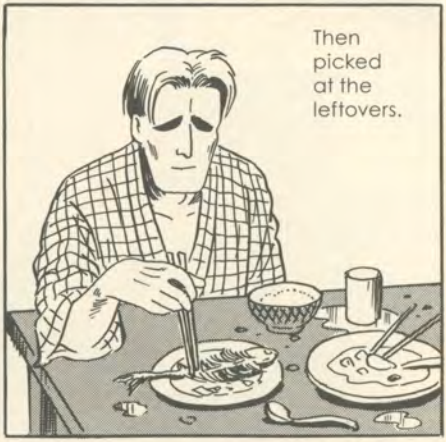

Since her husband killed himself driving drunk, the woman was not eligible for life insurance payments and lived on the brink of destitution.

Nonetheless, he never picked on her kids. He was a docile character. No one ever saw him get angry.

Though he reopened the bookshop, his extreme laziness was a great disappointment to his new wife.

During meals, he waited watching TV until everyone finished...
Feeling like a freeloader weighed on him.

There were also curious rumors that he had a wife and kids back in Ina.


Then picked at the leftovers.

I'm only here for a little while...

I'll have to go home some day...

Such rumors were based on things he himself let slip from time to time.

Vanish? Ha ha... Yeah, I know people used to say that about me.
Let me guess, you came here to vanish from there.
People suddenly disappearing, even though from the outside their lives seemed to lack nothing...
Or as beggars...
Ending up as menials at hot springs...

Look at Kamo no Chomei's Hosshin-shu
It's not?
It's not a new or rare thing.
From so long ago?
Or the Senjusho, attributed to Saigyo, with its many episodes of vanishing.
To abandon every-thing and disap-pear?
But what does it mean ...

旅
飯

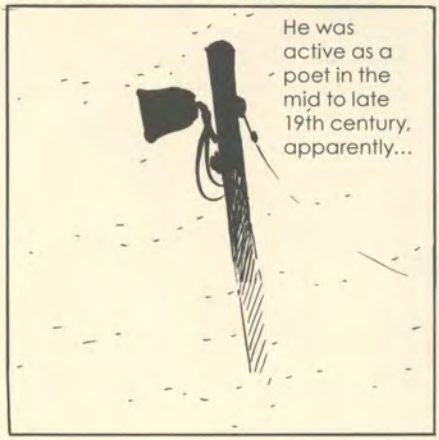
sign: Inn

Is it not, perhaps, a method for contemplating the nothingness of oneself?

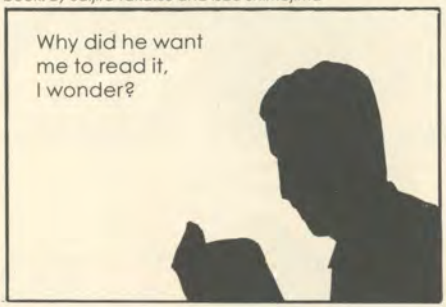
Isn't it like vanishing?
Being rejected by society as useless...
Your show of talentlessness isn't so different.
I'm sure some day you'll go home.
Here in this world, that is...
Yes, I'm only here for a short time...

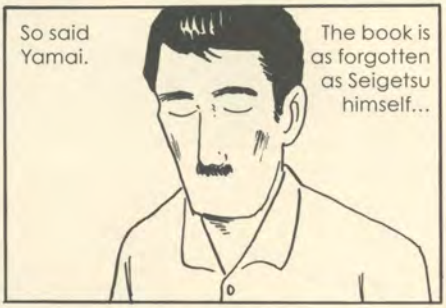
sign: Art stone fair

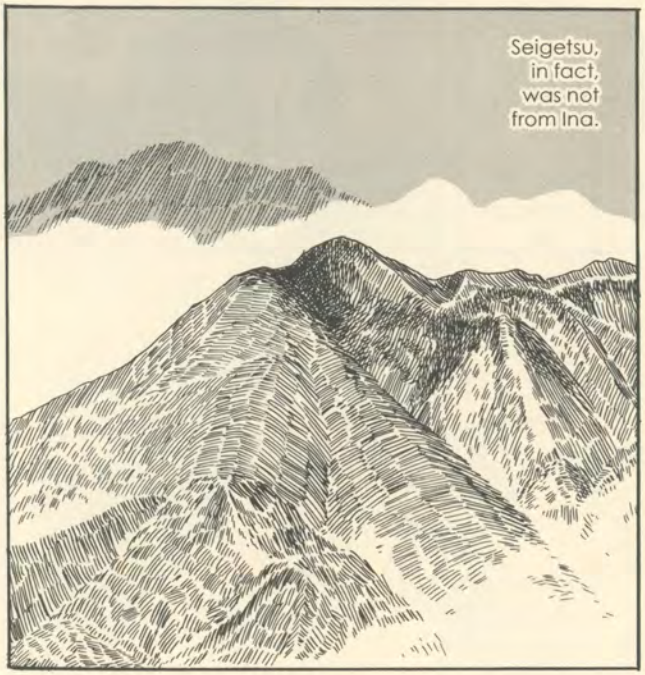
book: The Collected Works of Seigetsu, the Wandering Poet.



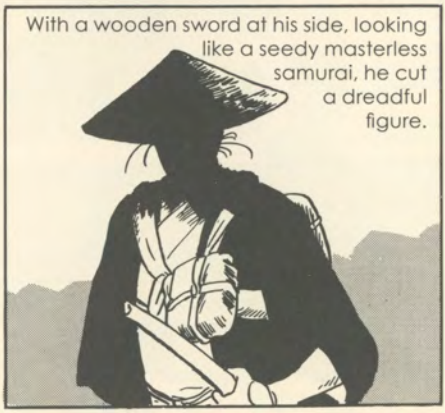
book: By Saijiro Takatsu and Isao Shimojima





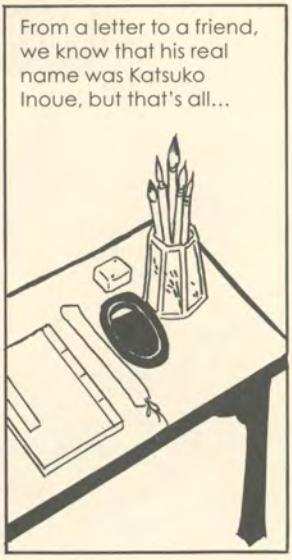


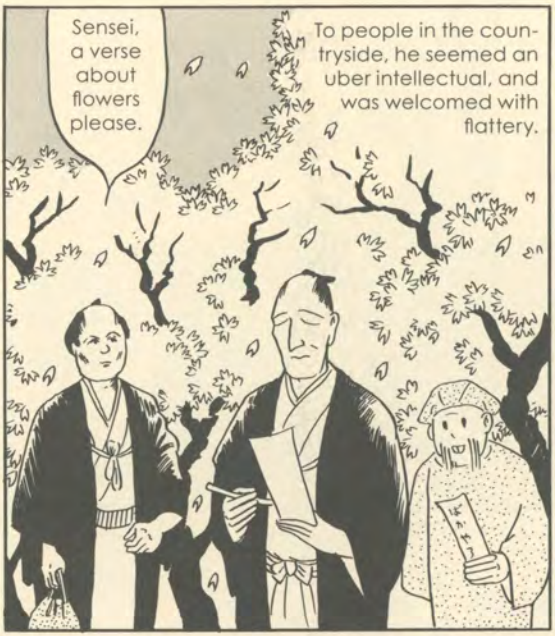
He suddenly appeared in the region in 1858, when he was around 36 or 37 years old.

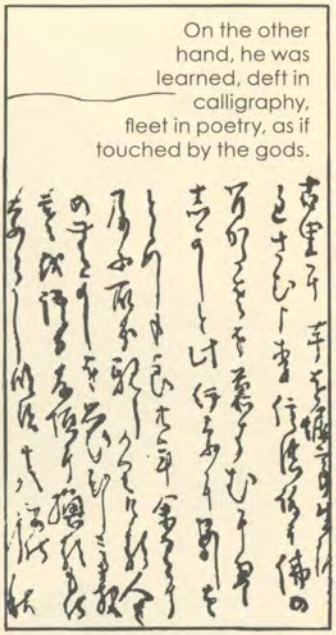

With a wooden sword at his side, looking like a seedy masterless samurai, he cut a dreadful figure.

About his background or where he came from, nothing is known.

But in Seigetsu's case, there is nothing for the historian to go on. It's as if his life just vanished into the fog.




Sensei, a verse about flowers please.
To people in the countryside, he seemed an uber intellectual, and was welcomed with flattery.


On the other hand, he was learned, deft in calligraphy, fleet in poetry, as if touched by the gods.

Sensei, a verse about chestnuts.

Deciding where, once fallen, the chestnuts will lie—
little pit

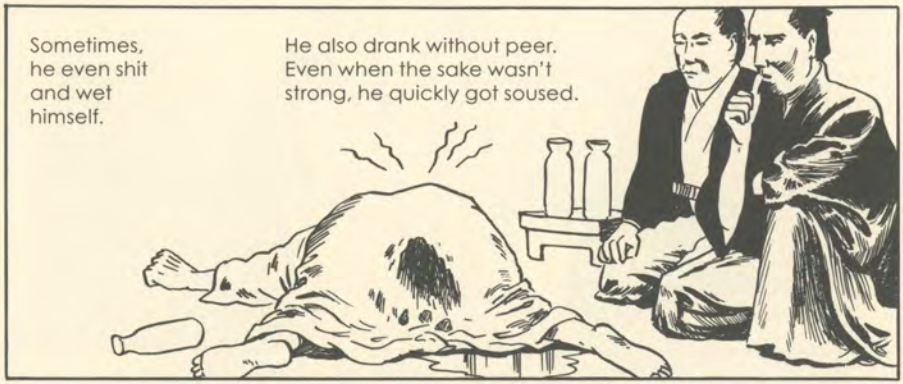
Letting people watch even their dispersal—
petal clouds

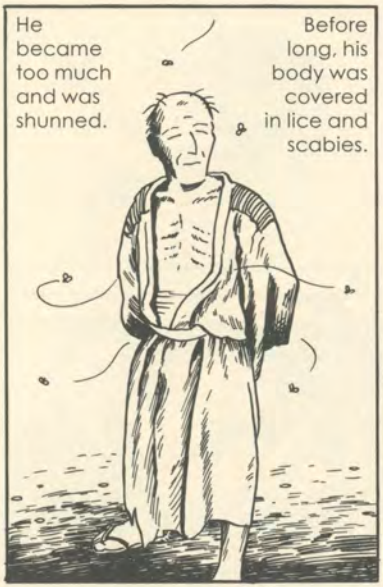
Sweet flag, in what life did you become skin on stones?
Sensei, my pride and joy tray stones.
From somewhere I hear a crane's cry mistily.
Sensei, the fog sure is thick today.

From somewhere I hear a heron's cry... Not!
The "crane's cry" was said to be the last poem Seigetsu wrote before he died, but actually it seems to date from much earlier.
KWAA
"In what life did you become skin on stones?" – I love it!
Seigetsu even understood stones...
His stay stretched on for more than 30 years.
But what was this uber intellectual doing in the remote and backward mountains of the Ina Valley?

The Ina Valley became the resting place for his own personal chestnut...
A man unneeded by the world, I am like a fallen chestnut which the rains aim to wither still more
Which meant that his life in the Ina Valley entailed...
Wandering that way, wandering this way, a vagabond with no fixed place in this narrow valley.
Like the great Matsuo Basho, whom he worshipped, Seigetsu followed the clouds upon the wind as if possessed by gods.

He visited and stayed with one poetry-loving host after another...
Nowhere was out of bounds.
For nights or naps...
is was what he would say.
1,000 gold pieces! 1,000 gold pieces!
But when he was in good spirits...
He was mild, a gentleman with proper manners, who said little.


Sometimes, he even shit and wet himself.
He also drank without peer. Even when the sake wasn't strong, he quickly got soused.


He became too much and was shunned.
Before long, his body was covered in lice and scabies.

Ew! It's Seigetsu the bum!
Brats harassed him.

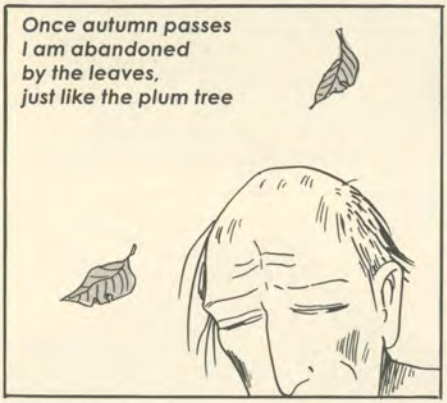
Dogs chased him.

Lice man Seigetsu!
GASH
But never did he display any anger.

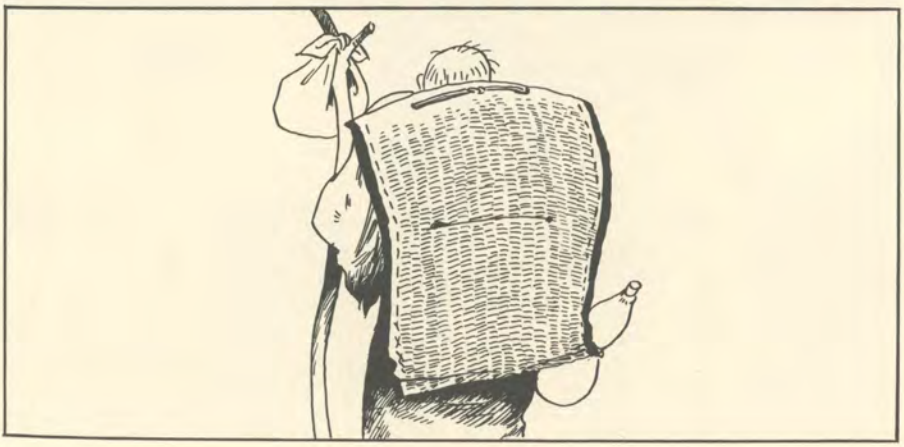
pitter patter
titter totter
Seigetsu was a horrible alcoholic. This was evident from the painfully slow way he moved. If one were to describe it...
Yamai...
wobble
hobble

When Seigetsu finally became an unbearable burden to everyone, he was taken to Zenkoji temple on a pilgrimage...
And left there.
MOOO
HELLLLO
As Nagaoka was not far from Zenkoji, Seigetsu thought he might try to go home.

Well if it isn't ole Seigetsu!
But like the lice on his body, Seigetsu would not leave the Ina-valley.

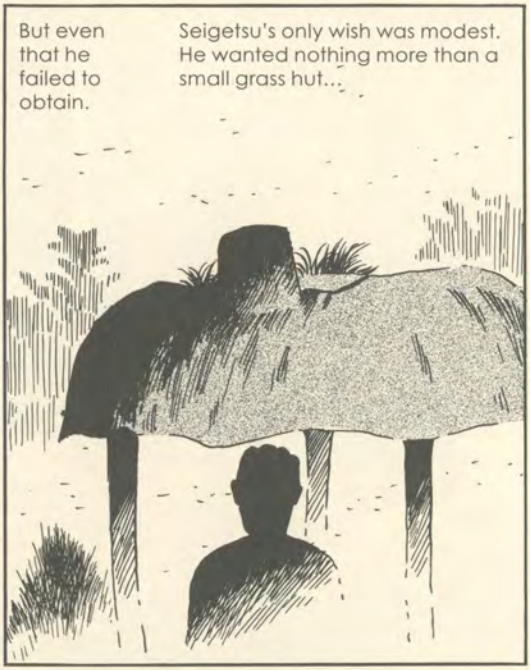

Once autumn passes
I am abandoned
by the leaves,
just like the plum tree

Here, a gift verse for you.



WIGGLE
WIGGLE
SMUSH
With the Meiji Restoration in 1868, modernization turned the world upside down.
Louse one louse two louse three
1,000 gold pieces! 1,000 gold pieces!
Hee hee hee

I wonder if this is what those famous grass huts were like?


But even that he failed to obtain.
Seigetsu's only wish was modest. He wanted nothing more than a small grass hut...

These plain old leaves?

Gimme a break.

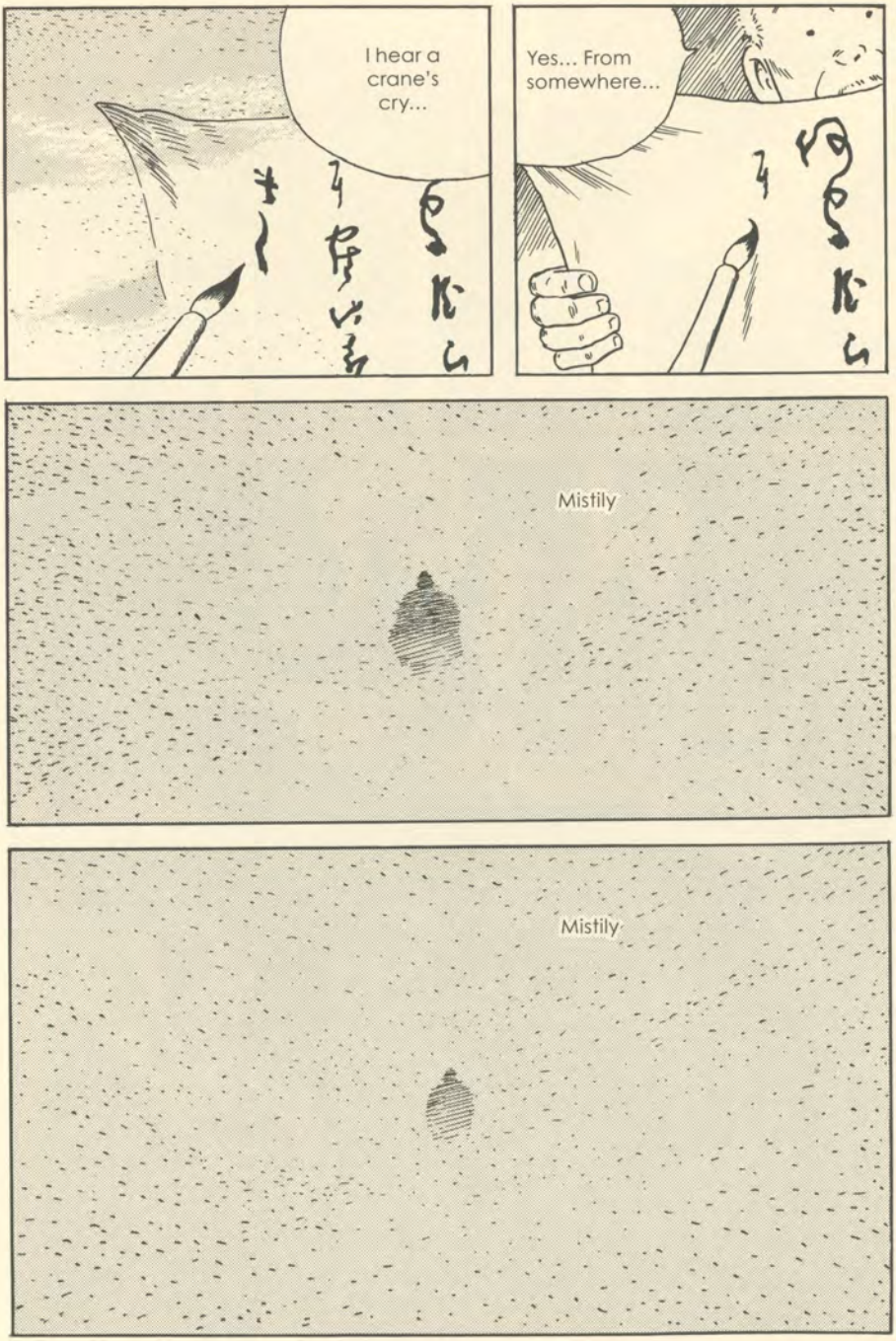
Gift?
In his last years, old poet friends turned him away at the door with some sake.
A gift for you.

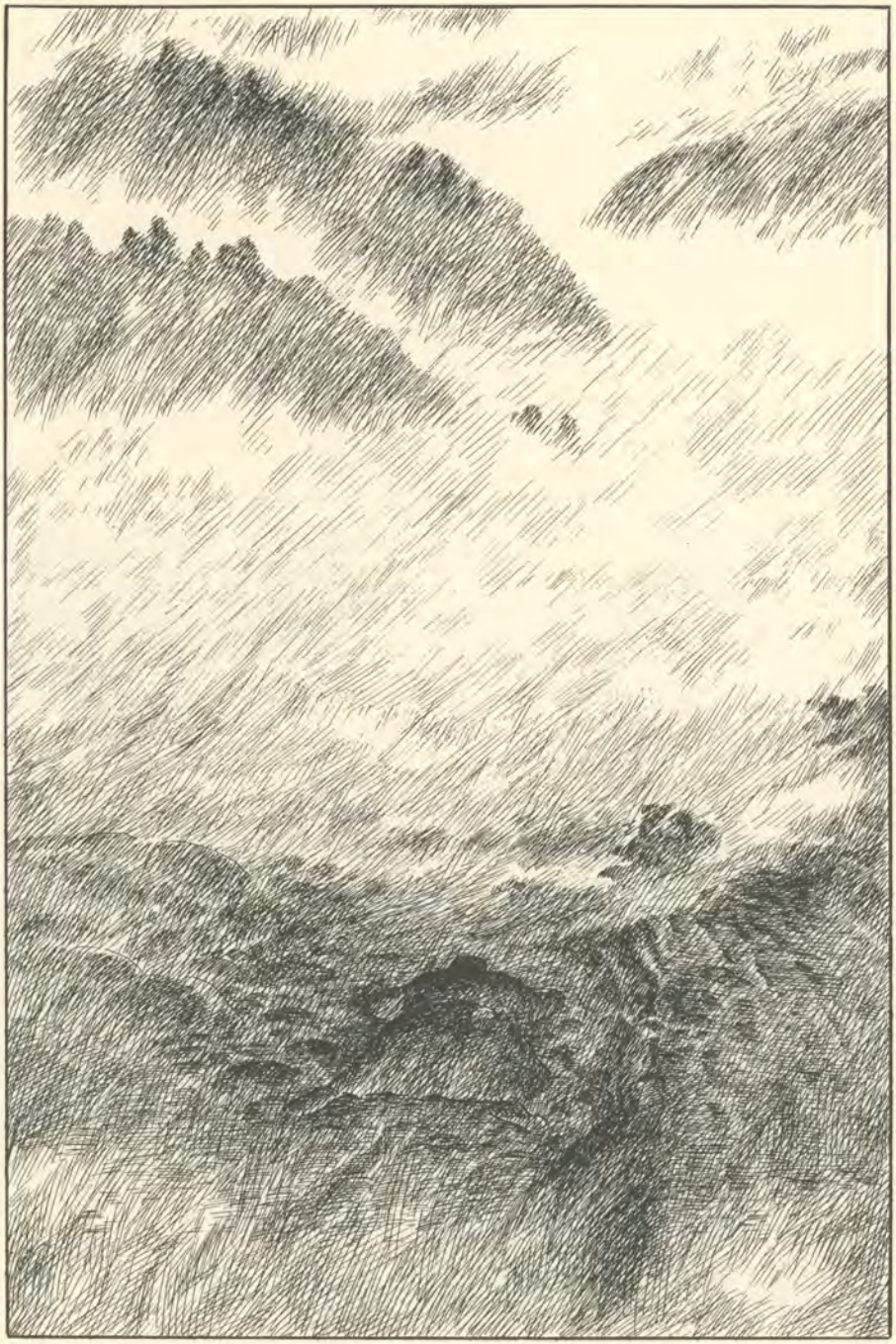
So I gave it to him.
A beggar was shivering in the cold...
What happened to that cotton padded coat I gave you?
Seigetsu!...
ZA
ZAAAAA

KAW
KAW
Seigetsu lay in a withered field, covered in crap, dead...
As the year 1886 drew to a close...

No look, he's still breathing.
Not sure what to do, the villagers put him on a plank...
I'm not touching him! He's smeared in shit!
His closest poetry friend finally took him in.
And took him from house to house.

Seigetsu passed away on March 12th of the following year, in 1887, at the age of 66.
Inside a barn, wretched and unable to speak...
Seigetsu, please...
Upon his dying breath, his old friends requested one final poem.
Try...
AAAAH
Your deathbed verse...


I hear a crane's cry...
Yes... From somewhere...
Mistily
Mistily



sign: Art stone fair